ROMAN MYTHOLOGY

DON NARDO

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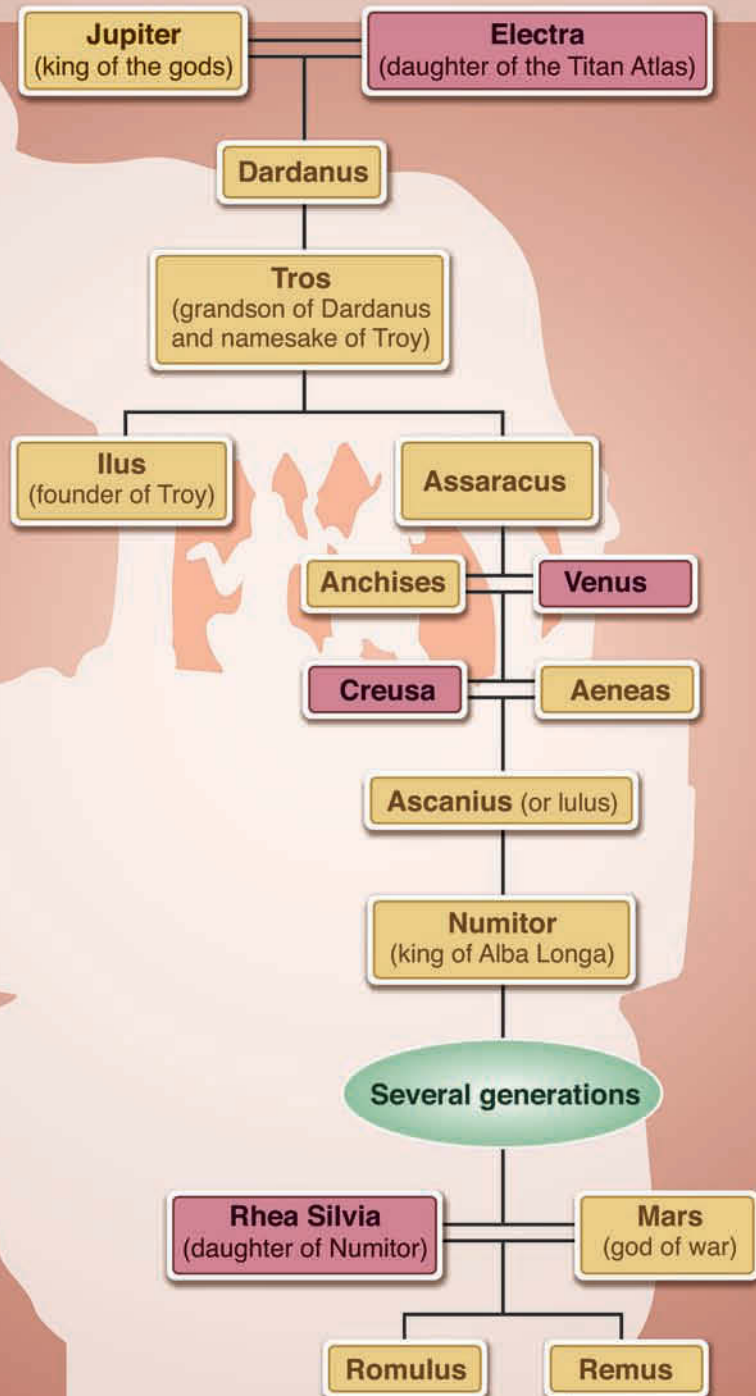
Major Characters in Roman Mythology

Character Name	Pronunciation	Description
Achilles	uh-KILL-eez	A great Greek warrior and the main character of Homer's *Iliad*.
Aeneas	i-NEE-us	A Trojan prince who escapes Troy's fall, sails to Italy, and establishes the Roman race.
Anchises	an-KY-seez	Father of the Roman hero Aeneas.
Ancus Marcius	AN-cis MAR-kee-us	The legendary fourth king of early Rome.
Apollo	uh-POL-oh	The Greek and Roman god of prophecy and healing.
Ascanius	a-SCAN-ee-us	Son of Aeneas.
Cloelia	klo-EL-ee-a	A Roman maiden who engineers a mass escape from an enemy camp.
Coriolanus	cor-ee-oh-LAIN-us	A mythical Roman soldier who fled to an enemy camp but in the end refused to attack his native city.
Dido	DY-doh	Queen of Carthage, who falls in love with the Trojan prince Aeneas.
Faustulus	FOS-chu-lus	A shepherd or farmer who raised Romulus and Remus.
Hector	HEK-ter	In Homer's *Iliad*, a prince of Troy and a great warrior.
Horatius	huh-RAY-shee-us	A legendary Roman hero who stops an army from invading Rome.
Isis	EYE-sis	An Egyptian goddess adopted by the Romans.
Juno	JOO-noh	Wife of Jupiter and patron of women and marriage.
Jupiter	JOO-pi-ter	The leader of the Roman gods.

Latinus	**LAT-in-us**	An early Italian king who befriends Aeneas.
Lavinia	**la-VIN-ee-a**	Latinus's daughter, who marries Aeneas.
Mars	**MARZ**	The Roman god of war.
Mercury	**MER-cure-ee**	The Roman messenger god.
Neptune	**NEP-toon**	The Roman god of the seas.
Numa Pompilius	**NOO-ma pom-PIL-ee-us**	The legendary second king of early Rome.
Numitor	**NOO-muh-tor**	Grandfather of Romulus and Remus.
Remus	**REE-mus**	Twin brother of Romulus, founder of Rome.
Romulus	**ROM-ya-lus**	The founder of Rome.
Sibyl	**SIB'L**	A prophetess, or medium, who leads Aeneas down into the Underworld.
Titus Tatius	**TY-tis TAH-tee-us**	An early Sabine king who comes to rule Rome jointly with Romulus.
Turnus	**TER-nis**	An Italian prince who fights Aeneas for Lavinia's hand in marriage.
Venus	**VEE-nis**	The Roman goddess of love and beauty.
Volumnia	**vuh-LOOM-nee-a**	Mother of Coriolanus, who convinces him to do his duty to Rome.

Did the Romans Believe Their Myths?

The question of whether the ancient Romans believed that the stories told in their myths were true is important when examining those stories. Throughout human history, all peoples and societies have had myths—fictional tales involving supernatural events and characters. Frequently among those characters are gods, angels, and other heavenly beings, so more often than not myths tend to be connected in way with religious beliefs. Because of that connection, devout peoples typically start out accepting the validity of their myths.

Over time, however, it is not uncommon for doubt to set in. What had been viewed as real events steadily come to be seen as parables, stories intended to teach a moral, or social lesson. Today, for example, a number of biblical tales fall into that category. For centuries the stories of Adam and Eve and Noah and the Ark were widely accepted as true. But although some people still take them at face value, many others now see them as fables, part of Western civilization's rich collection of folklore.

Rome at Its Height

The myths of the ancient Greeks and Romans are also integral parts of Western folklore. Regarding the matter of whether

or not the Romans believed their own myths, one must first consider which Romans one is talking about. Roman civilization was exceptionally long-lived. It lasted at least fourteen centuries, roughly six times longer than the United States has so far existed as a country. During Rome's long life, its people underwent numerous political and cultural changes, military and economic successes and failures, and transformations in religious beliefs and rituals. Not surprisingly, therefore, the way they viewed their myths also altered over time.

For the sake of clarity, many modern studies of Rome narrow the discussion to the period when it was strongest, most influential, and most culturally creative and accomplished. That era roughly spanned the years 100 B.C. to A.D. 200. The last two of those three centuries, encompassing the early phase of the Roman Empire, was also the period when the Roman realm was most stable and secure. It had conquered all the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea, including the Greek kingdoms and city-states in the eastern sector of that sphere. Moreover, most of the early Roman emperors were enlightened, effective rulers. They and their policies brought Roman civilization to its height, moving the great eighteenth-century English historian Edward Gibbon to remark, "If a man were called upon to fix the period in the history of the world during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would without hesitation name [the early years of the Empire], possibly the only period of history in which the happiness of a great people was the sole object of government."[1]

The Greco-Roman poets and historians of these centuries recorded the Roman myths in their writings. To do so, they drew on the works of earlier Greek writers, as well as Roman oral traditions that had survived from prior centuries. In fact, a majority of these mythical stories dealt with the events and leading figures of early Roman history. Prominent among them were the tales of the establishment of the Roman race by a foreign prince named Aeneas and the founding of Rome by Romulus.

Between Human and Supernatural

For a long time, these were accepted as real people and events. What is more, it was thought that they had been

Eighteenth-century British historian Edward Gibbon wrote that Rome's initial imperial centuries was perhaps the only time in history in which the happiness of the people was the sole objective of government.

guided and sanctioned by the gods. Supposedly, the leader of the Roman gods, Jupiter, had said of the Roman people, "I grant them dominion without end. [We gods cherish] the Romans, the master race, the wearers of the toga. So it is willed!"[2] The earliest Romans had been devoutly religious, and a fair measure of that devotion survived into the period when Rome reached its height. The renowned first-century B.C. orator, senator, and scholar Cicero acknowledged these

facts, saying, "So deep was the religious feeling of our ancestors that some generals would veil their heads and in solemn phrases offer up their lives to the gods in the service of their country. . . . [Similarly today,] in religion and the worship of the gods, we are pre-eminent [among all peoples]."[3]

Cicero had the benefit not only of his soaring intellect, but also of the fact that the zenith of his political and literary career occurred in the 50s and 40s B.C., near the boundary of two great Roman eras. These were the Roman Republic (circa 509–30 B.C.) and the Roman Empire (30 B.C.–A.D. 476). The increasingly troubled Cicero witnessed the Republic, with a government run by senators and other representatives of the people, struggle in its death throes. A series of devastating civil wars had recently hammered the government into submission and allowed a handful of powerful generals to amass great power. Cicero had no way of knowing that one of these men, Octavian, would soon become the first Roman emperor, Augustus (the "revered one").

What Cicero *did* know was that the civil wars and the political changes they brought about had deeply affected most Romans. Indeed, there was widespread sentiment that these upheavals had, behind the scenes, been instigated by the gods. "The immortal gods," Cicero wrote, "who stirred up so terrible and tragic a civil war, were evidently exacting [revenge] from the Roman people for some sin it had committed. But now [the gods] are at last appeased . . . and have concentrated all their hopes for a happy future [for the people]."[4]

Cicero correctly sensed that the trauma of the civil wars had made most Romans more receptive than ever to the call of traditional religious beliefs. Along with those beliefs came a strong conviction that the old stories about the early Roman heroes were true. It can be said with some confidence, therefore, that the Romans of the late Republic and early Empire did believe their myths.

This enthusiastic acceptance of the reality of those traditional tales comes through loud and clear in the writings of the great historian of the late Republican period, Titus Livius, better known today as Livy (59 B.C.–A.D. 17). In the introduction of his enormous history of Rome, he admitted

that some of the centuries-old stories had "more the charm of poetry than of a sound historical record." Yet he was convinced that the gods had chosen his country to rule the world. In his mind, if one accepted that the gods had intervened in human affairs, it was no great leap to believe the myths were true. He wrote,

> There is no reason, I feel, to object when [ancient times] draws no hard line between the human and the supernatural. It adds dignity to the past, and, if any nation deserves the privilege of claiming a divine ancestry, that nation is our own. And so great is the glory won by the Roman people . . . that when they declare that Mars [god of war] himself was their first parent and father of the man who founded their city, all the nations of the world [must readily agree].[5]

A People Proud of Their Myths

Greek and Roman mythology are often presented together in modern books about ancient myths. This makes sense in some ways. For instance, both mythologies are filled with heroes who had performed brave deeds in bygone ages. Also, some of the same gods and heroes inhabit both mythologies, only with different names. One prominent example is the leader of the gods, called Zeus by the Greeks and Jupiter by the Romans; another is the fearless, big-hearted strongman known as Heracles by the Greeks and Hercules by the Romans.
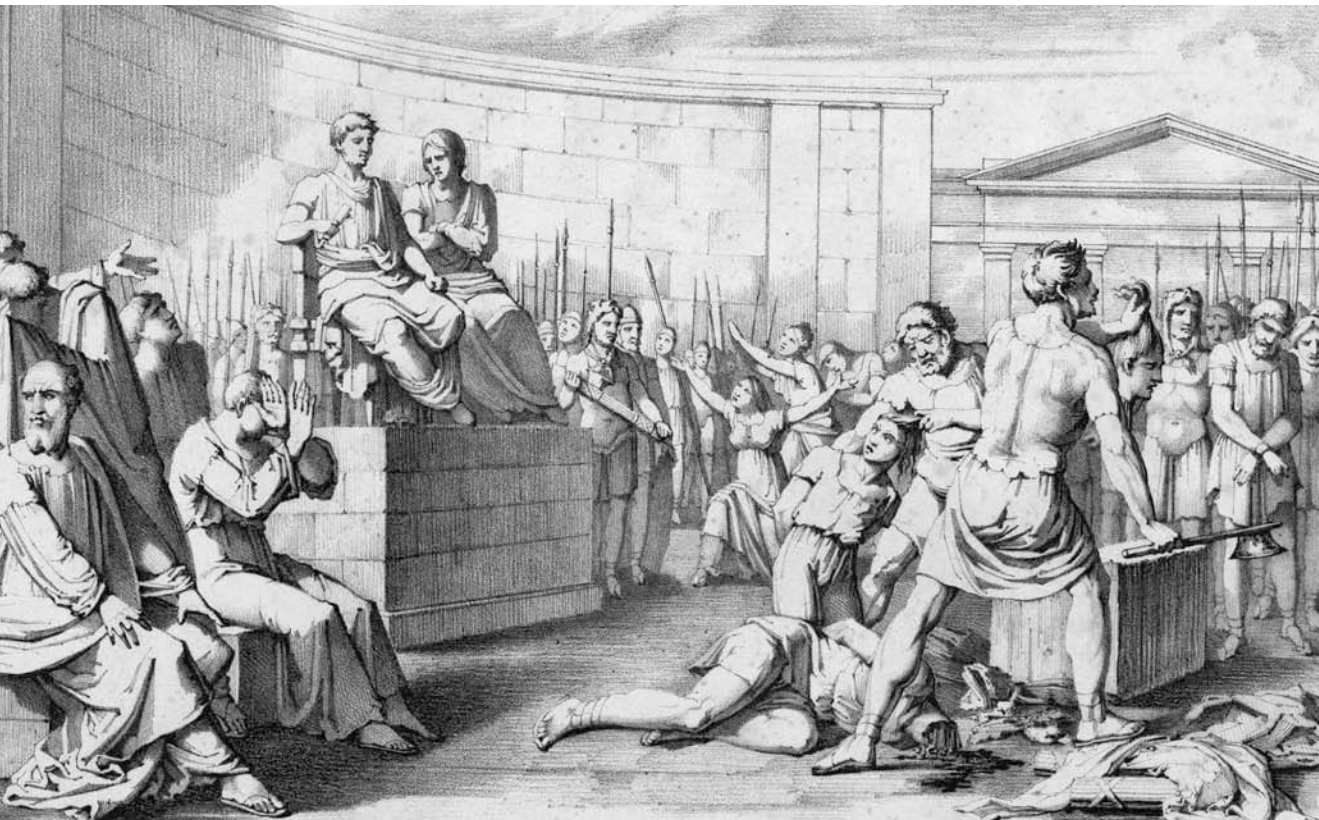
Sources of Roman Myths

The two mythologies also had a number of differences, the chief one being the general sources of the tales they told. For the most part, the events and characters of the Greek myths originated in a lost civilization of the dim past. Long before the rise of the so-called classical Greek society that produced Socrates, Pericles, and Plato, the Greek sphere was home to two prosperous, accomplished peoples. The Minoans inhabited Crete and other Aegean islands, while the Mycenaeans, who spoke an early form of Greek, lived on the Greek mainland. After Minoan-Mycenaean civilization collapsed and disappeared between 1200 and 1100 B.C.,

marking the close of the Bronze Age, the people of the region more or less forgot their heritage. A dark age descended and only after literacy and prosperity returned several centuries later did the classical Greeks arise. Their myths consisted in part of faint surviving echoes of people, places, and events from the long-dead Bronze Age. The later Greeks came to call that past era the Age of Heroes.

In contrast, most Roman myths developed quite differently than those of the Greeks. Of the two main sources of Roman mythology, the first was Greek mythology, which the Romans absorbed a little at a time after coming into contact with the Greeks. (The Romans grudgingly admitted that many aspects of Greek culture were superior to their own and unashamedly copied them.) This is why a number of myths perpetuated by Roman storytellers were essentially Greek stories in which the gods and other characters had Roman rather than Greek names. In addition to Jupiter vs. Zeus and

The Roman Republic, established in 509 B.C., would execute those who tried to overthrow any part of the new government.

Hercules vs. Heracles, the Greek goddess of war and wisdom, Athena, was identified as Minerva in the Roman versions of the tales. Similarly, the Greek Ares, god of war, became the Roman god Mars.

Another, even more important source of Roman myths was early Roman history. The Romans of the late Republic and early Empire were separated from that early history by several centuries. During most of those centuries, there were few official records kept and no detailed histories written. So most information about historical events and characters passed orally from one generation to the next. Under these conditions, the tales were subject to exaggeration and other changes added by succeeding storytellers. Many of the chief figures in the stories became larger than life and even more heroic than they had actually been. Also over time some fictional events and figures likely crept into the myths thanks to the efforts of the more creative and imaginative storytellers.

The fact that the early events of Roman history were subject to alteration in the transmission of myths from generation to generation proved vital to the way the later Romans viewed themselves. Thanks to their myths, the deeds of their long-dead ancestors were seen largely in a positive light. At the same time, despite their fictionalized elements, these myths managed to preserve at least some of Rome's early history, information that would otherwise have been lost. Scholar Jane F. Gardner explains,

> The period from the supposed origins of Rome down to the . . . establishment of the Republic (traditionally 509 B.C.) cannot be called "historical" [i.e., supported by written evidence] in our sense of the word. Neither can much of what appears in literary accounts of the first generation or two of the Republic. [Modern experts agree that these sources are] full

The First Emperor

Augustus, the first Roman emperor, was long known as Octavian. In his efforts to acquire power and influence, he often used unethical and aggressive means. But once in power as Augustus, he ruled in a just, evenhanded manner.

of invention and contamination from later sources. For anyone interested in myth-making, however, these traditions are a treasure-house, for in them, and in the way they change and develop right down through the historical period [i.e., the era when the Romans began keeping historical accounts], we see the Romans defining themselves through the stories they tell about their past—that is, through their myths. They use a variety of materials, such as ideas and motifs [themes] copied from Greek mythology and history, motifs of a traditional folklore type, and stories from the [oral] family traditions of some of the great Roman families.[6]

The Crudeness of Early Rome

During most of Rome's Monarchy, from 753 to 509 B.C., the urban center on the hills near the Tiber River was a crude, disorganized, unimpressive settlement with dirt streets that became thick with mud when it rained. Evidence uncovered by archaeologists shows that these streets were lined mostly with rudimentary huts made of timber and thatch. There were also a few larger buildings, including temples and perhaps a small palace, that were made of wood and perhaps fieldstones. Few traces of these structures have survived, partly because the building materials were highly per-ishable, and also because bigger, more permanent buildings arose over them. All through the Monarchy and during the early centuries of the Republic, most Romans did not live in this central town. Instead, they dwelled in small villages and farms in the surrounding countryside. Only in the mid-to-late Republic did Rome grow into a large city with hundreds of thousands of residents.

During Rome's Monarchy period, from 753 to 509 B.C., the city's urban center was a crude settlement of mud and thatched-roof huts similar to this model.

Livy and Virgil

Thus, in committing the major Roman myths to writing, Roman writers of the late first century B.C. drew on a variety of sources, including folklore and oral traditions. Particularly popular were Livy and the poet Virgil (70 B.C.–19 B.C.). Livy's massive *History of Rome from Its Foundation* glorified many of Rome's early leaders as he told the stories of how they laid the foundations for the Romans' rise to prominence and ultimate power. As the late, noted scholar Michael Grant pointed out, "Reverence for their ancestors" lay at the core of the Romans' "religious and social life." Livy fully recognized this and the deep respect he felt for Rome's ancestral inhabitants inspired him to speak fondly about early Roman history. The initial passages of his great history, Grant adds,

> are among the most stimulating of all Livy's work. . . . He is an artist undertaking in rich, clear, vivid language, an unprecedented eight-century-long reconstruction of Rome's national greatness, with much attention to the mythology in which its early days were concealed. . . . Though he aims at telling the truth, his main purpose is to draw moral lessons from the mythical or historical past for the needs of the present and the glorification of Rome.[7]

The narrative Livy laid out only rarely shows the gods getting involved in human affairs, as so many Greek myths do. Rather, he portrays the early Roman founders as military, political, and social heroes who also happened to be devoutly religious, God-fearing individuals. The idea that the gods watched over and approved of the founders' actions runs through the background of his text. Yet Livy tells the story as straightforward history, in which, quite appropriately, the divine beings usually maintain their distance from humanity.

Probably in part because Virgil's storytelling dealt with much older, more remote events, he did picture a number of direct interactions between gods and humans. In this way, his myth-telling resembles that of the Greeks more than Livy's does. Virgil's mighty epic poem the *Aeneid* traces the mythical beginnings of the Roman race, many generations

Virgil, center, authored the famous epic poem the Aeneid, *which traces the mythical beginnings of the Roman people before the founding of Rome.*

before the founding of Rome supposedly took place. As in the Greeks' Age of Heroes, the world Virgil depicts is alive with divine and magical forces and personalities. It is a place where the hero, Aeneas, and other noble characters must struggle continuously to counteract the anger and revenge of various gods.

However they approached telling their country's myths, the Roman writers of the late Republic and early Empire were careful to connect the events of the past to those of their own day. Thus, the actions of the mythical Roman heroes were depicted as part of a huge national drama that was still unfolding. The men and women who had established the Roman race, the city of Rome, and Roman culture were not quaint ancient folk populating a charming, faraway age. Instead, they were the direct grandparents, so to speak, of the powerful and splendid Rome of Livy and Virgil's own time. Consequently, these writers seemed to imply, although Rome's past had been noble, its present was even more admirable, and hopefully its future would be still more glorious.

In this way, many of the myths recognized by the Romans at the height of their civilization were real, tangible, meaningful tales that they could relate to and were deeply proud of.

Roman Origins

One of the major reasons that most of early Rome's historical events survived as myths rather than as straightforward history is that the Romans of Livy's and Virgil's time lacked extensive historical records. First, few Romans before the fourth century B.C. knew how to read and write. Also, any historical records that might have existed from earlier periods were destroyed by wars and other upheavals. Livy himself explained why such written historical records did not exist: "A further reason [for the scarcity of records] was the loss of most of such accounts as were preserved in the commentaries of the [religious leaders] and other public and private records when the city [of Rome] was destroyed by fire [during an invasion of Barbarians from the north in the 380s B.C.]."[8]

The Romans also lacked a systematic science of archaeology—digging up and studying the past—that to some degree might have made up for their scarcity of written records. With a few isolated exceptions, they did not try to search for and preserve relics of earlier times. As a result, a number of frequently disconnected myths had to substitute for real histories of early Rome.

In contrast, modern historians have the benefit of archaeological, linguistic (language-related), and other studies that have helped them piece together some parts of Rome's early history. A brief summary of what is known about the real historical facts helps to place the surviving myths of those times in a clearer context. It also shows that those myths were sometimes based on faulty information.

For example, the Romans of Cicero's day accepted the myth that depicted a character named Romulus as establishing the city of Rome on an unoccupied spot near the Tiber River. However,

Roman Magistrates

In addition to the senators and consuls, other magistrates of the Republic included court judges called praetors; aediles (EE-dials), who maintained roads and public buildings; censors, who oversaw public morality; and financial managers called quaestors.

archaeologists have discovered that Rome did not appear in a sudden, lone act of foundation. Instead, the evidence shows that the early Romans lived alongside the Tiber well before 753 B.C., the supposed date that Romulus founded the city. Those early inhabitants dwelled in several small villages located on the broad knolls that later came to be called the hills of Rome. T.J. Cornell, a leading expert on early Rome, says that these villages date back to at least 1000 B.C. Furthermore, he writes, in time "the pattern of settlement changed, as groups of villages began to coalesce [come together] and to form larger nucleated [centralized] units."[9] Thus, it appears that Rome came into existence only when the villages on the Roman hills united into a single town.

One question that archaeologists long asked was where the inhabitants of these villages came from in the first place. Among the leading early theories was one that pictured a

Archeological digs in Rome, such as this one, have unearthed many pre-Republic houses that contribute to the growing body of knowledge about the city's early history.

group of Latin-speaking tribes migrating into Italy from central or eastern Europe sometime in the second millennium (the 1000s) B.C. Later, many scholars backed a rival theory, which held that the Romans were native to central Italy—part of the so-called "Apennine culture" (named after the mountain range that runs from north to south through the Italian Peninsula).

A first-century marble relief depicts Rome's mythical founder Romulus laying out Rome's sacred boundary by plowing it with oxen.

The Monarchy

Wherever the Romans may have originated, at some point early in the first millennium B.C. they established a government headed by a king. Modern historians came to call it, along with the period in which it existed, the Roman Monarchy. The area these early kings lorded over was relatively small, probably covering little more than a few hundred square miles. Most of it was made up of scattered small farms, dense forests, and dismal swamps. Evidence indicates that the central town, on the hills near the Tiber, remained small, disorganized, dirty, and culturally backward for several centuries.

According to later tradition, seven kings ruled Rome beginning in 753 B.C.—Romulus, Numa Pompilius, Tullus Hostilius, Ancus Marcius, Tarquinius Priscus, Servius Tullius, and Tarquinius Superbus (or "Tarquin the Proud").

The general consensus of modern experts is that the first three men were legendary and the other four were likely real people. Scholars also think, however, that several other kings whose names have not survived probably ruled the city during the years of the Monarchy. This does not mean that Romulus, the supposed founder of Rome, was not a real person. There may well have been a prominent early Roman named Romulus. But if so, no evidence has been unearthed linking him to either the founding or the kingship. As Cornell points out, "the name 'Romulus' is a [word] formed from the name of the city, and perhaps means simply 'the Roman.'"[10] Thus, it is possible that this name was conjured up by one of the early myth-tellers to fill a gap that then existed in the founding tale.

Historians are also unsure how the Roman kings were selected. Livy and other later Roman writers say that the male citizens voted the king into office. This is quite possible, as such elections did occur in some Greek cities in this period. Usually, men well-off enough to own armor and iron weapons, which were then expensive items, were the only people qualified to vote. These community soldiers likely met now and then in an assembly to choose leaders and discuss important community matters. Livy mentions that at one point after Romulus's death such an assembly convened, presided over by the members of the king's advisory board, the Senate. (That group would later become a governmental body with extensive authority.) One senator, according to Livy, addressed the assembly, saying,

> "Men of Rome. May luck and every blessing attend us. Choose your king, for such is the senators' decision. If the man you choose is a worthy successor to Romulus, the senators will ratify your choice." The commons [common people] were delighted. Determined to show no less generosity than their masters, they passed a resolution that the election should be decided by a decree of the Senate. . . . Numa's name [Numa Pompilius] was put forward as successor to the throne [and] nobody ventured to put forward a rival candidate . . . with the result that there was a unanimous decision to offer Numa the crown.[11]

It is important to note that Livy lived many centuries after this supposed event and had little more than the hearsay of long-lived oral tales to guide him in writing his history. The Senate was a very powerful body in Rome when he was born. It is quite possible, therefore, that he, and the storytellers he relied on, gave the senators of the early Monarchy more authority than they actually possessed. If so, the powers of the senators in the Roman myths were exaggerated. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that over time the real, historical Senate rapidly gained authority in Roman politics. In the words of one noted scholar, the early senators were almost certainly

> representatives of the richest and noblest families (*gentes*). It is possible that these persons were commonly called "fathers" (*patres*), and their descendants "patricians." From a very early date the patricians enjoyed a number of privileges, among the most important being the right of acting as intermediaries between the king and the gods [and] as cavalry [mounted soldiers] on [military] campaigns.[12]

Rise of the Republic

Eventually, these Roman fathers decided that they were strong and popular enough to rule Rome themselves, without the need of a king whom they increasingly viewed as a mere figurehead. The result was the end of the Monarchy and the establishment of the Roman Republic. The exact circumstances of this famous and decisive event remain uncertain. All that Livy and other later writers had at their disposal were the myths, in which the reigning monarch, Tarquin the Proud, was deposed and locked out of the city by the patriotic patricians, led by Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus and Lucius Junius Brutus. In one legend, these men were motivated to overthrow the king after Tarquin's son, Sextus, had raped Collatinus's daughter Lucretia. Sextus supposedly also committed other heinous acts that enraged the city fathers.

High Republican Officials

In this passage from his treatise On Laws, *the first-century B.C. orator and senator Cicero describes three important offices in the Republic—those of the consuls, the dictator (to be filled in a national emergency), and the praetors, or high judges.*

There shall [be] two officials with the power that used to belong to the kings. . . . It is "consuls" that they will be habitually called. While on military service they will be invested with supreme authority. There shall be no one above them. Their dominant preoccupation shall be the welfare of the people. . . . When, however, a serious war occurs, or civil strife, a single man shall be invested with the power that normally belongs to the two consuls, if the Senate so decrees. But this dictatorship shall not last longer than six months. . . . The praetor shall be the man who administers justice, and pronounces or guides the verdicts in private lawsuits. It is he who shall be guardian of the civil law. The praetors shall possess equal powers, and there shall be as many of them as the Senate decrees or the assembly ordains.

Cicero. *On Laws.* In *Cicero: On Government.* Translated by Michael Grant. New York: Penguin, 1993, p. 196.

Whether or not the real events resembled those in the myths, the Republic did replace the kingship in about 509 B.C. The new government kept in place the traditional assembly of male citizens, which could vote on new laws and elect the main magistrates, or public officials. These officials were headed by two consuls who served jointly for a year. They oversaw governmental affairs and commanded the army in wartime. The new system also retained the Senate as an advisory body, only now to aid the consuls, rather than the kings, in their decisions. In addition to their advisory function, the senators came to wield huge authority and influence behind the scenes. For one thing, they were allowed to serve

for life. Moreover, they were patricians who regularly used their wealth and high position to influence the way members of the assembly voted. With rare exceptions, therefore, the Senate possessed more power and influence than any of the Republic's other government branches.

In the long run, it did not matter that the Republic was not a full-fledged democracy like the one that arose in the Greek city-state of Athens in the same period. Outside of Athens, Rome was considerably more politically enlightened than most other nation-states in the Mediterranean sphere. In part this was because the Romans also developed a legal system that grew increasingly fair and just as the years went by. These laws protected the civil rights of Roman citizens of all social classes. As Cicero later put it, for a Roman,

> [law] is the foundation of liberty, the fountainhead [main source] of justice. It is what keeps the heart and mind and initiative and feeling of our nation alive. The state without law would be like a body without [a] brain. . . . The magistrates who administer the law, the judges who act as its spokesmen, [and] all the rest of us who live as its servants, grant it our allegiance as a guarantee of our freedom.[13]

New Gods, New Myths

Another key factor that set the early Romans apart from many other peoples of their time was their approach to religion, which also colored and helped to shape their myths. During the Monarchy and most of the Republic, the vast majority of Romans were devout believers in a large number of gods and other supernatural beings and spirits. A number of these deities belonged to the official state religion, with a pantheon headed by Jupiter. Other members of this group included the war god Mars; Jupiter's divine wife, Juno; Neptune, who ruled the seas; and Venus, goddess of love. The government provided them with lavish temples and annual public festivals.

In addition, Roman society was unusually tolerant of others' beliefs. Beginning in the 200s B.C., Rome conquered a

long list of foreign lands and peoples. Instead of rejecting the gods and faiths of these peoples, the Romans incorporated them into their own spiritual ethos (culture or philosophy). Typically, after defeating an enemy city or nation, the victorious Roman general conducted a special ceremony in which he prayed to the local god, saying in part, "I respectfully ask [that] you may take under your protection me and the people of Rome."[14]

In this way, when they conquered Anatolia (what is now Turkey), the Romans absorbed the goddess Cybele, the so-called "Great Mother." Similarly, Rome incorporated the Persian god Mithras, the Syrian deity Atargatis, and the Egyptian goddess Isis.

This broad-minded approach to religion was based on the noble notion that all faiths are equal paths leading to the same place—the spiritual connection between a person and a god. Ultimately, it did not matter so much to the average Roman which god he or she connected with. The most important thing was to respect and honor that god, and all gods, because failure to do so might well bring down divine wrath, not only on the worshipper, but maybe on the entire community.

To honor and appease the god one favored, a Roman entered into a kind of contract, or pact, with that deity. This agreement was known as *do ut des,* meaning that the worshipper gave to the god so that the god might return the favor. The person's side of the bargain consisted of two simple acts—prayer and sacrifice. In the latter, the worshipper offered a gift to a deity, most often something that would provide the god with some form of nourishment. The most common example was slaughtering a cow, goat, or other animal atop an altar. The priest and his assistants cut up the creature and tossed the bones and fat into a sacred fire. People believed that the smoke rose up and nourished the god, while the worshippers proceeded to cook and eat the meat and organs as part of the ceremony.

The Romans performed such sacrifices for nearly every god they worshipped. By the end of the Republic there were a great many of these deities, and each had one or more background stories, consisting of what people today define

A Roman sculpture from the second century A.D. depicts the god Mithras slaying a bull. The cult of Mithras was just one of the foreign religions the Romans adopted from the peoples they conquered.

as myths. When Rome absorbed a new god, it also accepted its attendant myths, which became part of the overall Roman melting pot of legendary tales.

Typical of the numerous stories of this kind, with which a majority of Romans were familiar, was the goddess Isis's primary myth. Long ago in a dimly remembered age, it stated, her husband, Osiris, was king of Egypt. She helped him to rule well and fairly until the king's bother, Seth, became jealous of him. Seth slew Osiris, sliced the body into hundreds of pieces, and scattered them across Egypt. Rising to the occasion, Isis searched diligently until she found every piece of her husband's body, then employed magical spells to bring him back to life. Not surprisingly, the Romans, like the Egyptians before them, associated Isis with both wifely devotion and resurrection.

By the time that Cicero, Livy, and Virgil were writing about Rome's long past, therefore, the Roman people had accumulated a rich mythology. It was inhabited by a multitude of

gods and human heroes, characters that strongly appealed to Romans of all walks of life. Most importantly, the myths about Rome's origins and early growth helped to solidify the later Romans' identity as a people. As Gardner puts it, these colorful stories

> asserted Rome's claim to have been, from the first, outstanding and undefeated among the peoples of Italy . . . whom they were destined to rule. [The myths] also claimed for the Romans a share of the cultural birthright of the Greek civilization they had conquered. More than all this . . . they depicted Rome itself and its people as marked out by the gods to be the destined rulers of the whole world.[15]

Aeneas Establishes the Roman Race

Rome first came into contact with Greek civilization sometime in the mid-first millennium B.C. From then on, and especially after entering and conquering Greece in the second century B.C., the Romans became acutely aware that they lacked the kind of large, prestigious literary tradition the Greeks possessed. In particular, the Greeks could boast of the eighth-century B.C. poet Homer's great epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.* The former tells the story of the last year of the famous Trojan War, fought in the distant past between an alliance of early Greek kings and the Anatolian trading city of Troy. The *Odyssey* traces the adventures of one of those Greek kings, Odysseus, following Troy's fall.

The Romans did have a number of mythical heroes of their own, including Romulus, who had supposedly established Rome in 753 B.C.; however, the Romans realized that he and other legendary Roman characters did not compare in stature with the Greek and Trojan heroes who had fought at Troy. The Greek kings Odysseus and Ajax, Greek hero Achilles, and the Trojan prince Hector were seen throughout the Mediterranean world as warriors of immense stature and valor. Moreover, according to Homer, each had been favored by and had interacted directly with one or more gods.

Creating a Link to Troy

Desiring to increase the stature of their own past history and heroes, the Romans tried to create a link between their civilization and the immortal Trojan War. The chief approach they used was to associate one of the Greek or Trojan heroes with the Italian ancestors of Romulus and other early Roman founders and heroes. Using Achilles, Odysseus, or Hector was out of the question, as their fates had long been established. Hector had been slain before Troy's walls by Achilles, who was soon afterward killed by the Trojan prince Paris (who had started the war by abducting Helen, wife of one of the Greek kings). As for Odysseus, he had wandered for ten years after the war's end and finally made it back to his island kingdom of Ithaca, where he had spent the rest of his days.

There were, however, a few stalwart heroes of the Trojan War whose ultimate fates were not well established by Homer and other early Greek poets. One of these characters

was the Trojan prince Aeneas, son of Anchises, a cousin of Priam, who was king of Troy during the war with the Greeks. At one point in the *Iliad,* Aeneas engages in furious single combat with the great Achilles. When it becomes clear that Aeneas is losing, Poseidon (the Roman Neptune) decides to intervene and save him. "My heart aches for Aeneas," he tells his fellow gods.

> He'll go down to the House of Death [the Underworld] this instant, overwhelmed by Achilles. . . . Come, let us rescue him from death . . . so the generation of Dardanus [Aeneas's esteemed ancestor] will not perish, obliterated without an heir, without a trace. . . . [After he is saved,] Aeneas will rule the men of Troy [who survive the war, including] his sons' sons and the sons born in future years.[16]

Beyond this—that Aeneas will rule future generations of Trojans—Homer says nothing else about that warrior's destiny after the war. The problem was that various legends held that the Greeks burned and destroyed Troy after winning the conflict, which suggests that Aeneas had no city left to rule. Clearly, he would have to go somewhere else to establish his authority. Here, then, was an excellent candidate for the Romans to adopt as their link to the war, its great heroes, and the gods who had helped them. At some point, perhaps in the 500s B.C. or somewhat later, the story began to circulate that Aeneas had escaped from the burning Troy and traveled to distant Italy. There, after many exciting adventures, he established a line of descendants who became the early Romans.

The longest, most detailed, and, overall, the classic telling of Aeneas's fate and accomplishments was Virgil's epic the *Aeneid,* written between 29 B.C. and 19 B.C. The poet's main motives were to celebrate Rome's origins and triumphs and to glorify the image of his friend Augustus, the first Roman emperor. On his death in 19 B.C., Virgil had not quite

The *Aeneid* Completed

Virgil left orders that if he should die before the *Aeneid* was finished, it should be burned; however, when he did indeed die before its completion, Augustus intervened. The emperor forbade the work's destruction and ordered Rufus and Tucca to complete and publish it.

completed the work, so his close colleagues, Varius Rufus and Plotius Tucca, finished and lightly edited it.

Experts through the ages have agreed that the *Aeneid* is noble in its conception and beautifully written. The work is also noteworthy for the manner in which it portrays the Roman people. Virgil repeatedly emphasizes that they are special among the world's nations because they have a divinely ordained destiny to rule the world. Indeed, he depicts all of Roman history as a story leading up to the advent of Augustus's rule. In other words, what came to be called the Roman Empire was the end goal the gods had in mind when they saved Aeneas from death on the battlefield at Troy. In the words of the late scholar R.H. Barrow, "The most significant movement of history . . . according to Virgil, is the march of the Roman along the road of his destiny to a high civilization. . . . The stately *Aeneid* progresses throughout its length to this theme, the universal and the ultimate triumph of the Roman spirit as the highest manifestation of man's powers."[17]

In the Aeneid *Virgil relates the myth of Aeneas, center, and his family, who fled the burning city of Troy, eventually making their way to Italy. The work became Rome's national epic.*

Virgil's telling of Aeneas's myth, which became Rome's proud national epic, also proved powerful both politically and socially for the Romans. It was highly useful to them, T.J. Cornell points out,

> in that it gave them a respectable identity in the eyes of a wider world, and one that could be used to advantage in their dealings with the Greeks. . . . Finally, we should note that by claiming to be Trojans, the Romans were saying that they were not Greeks, and in a sense defining themselves in opposition to the Greeks. [Thus] in the hands of Virgil and other writers of the first century B.C., it became a means to reconcile them, and make Roman rule acceptable in the Greek world.[18]

Aeneas in Carthage

Perhaps to hit home to the reader that the hero of the myth was destined to reach Italy, the future Roman homeland, Virgil began his telling of the story in the middle. As the great epic opens, it is a full seven years after Troy's fall. Aeneas's small fleet of ships is coasting through the quiet waters near the large island of Sicily, just off Italy's southwestern shore. A great deal has happened to get Aeneas to this point in the narrative, of course. However, Virgil will soon reveal those important events through the literary device of the flashback.

For now, the reader is enticed into believing that Aeneas and his followers are about to land in Italy. But before this occurs, a god sees what is happening and decides to intervene. Juno, the spouse of Jupiter, possesses the ability to see into the future, and what she sees there troubles her. She is worried that if Aeneas establishes a new nation in Italy, it will someday reach out and destroy her favorite city, Carthage, situated in North Africa, only two days' sailing from Sicily.

Here, Virgil had the hindsight of knowing what had happened to Carthage by Roman hands in historic times and decided to work a reference to it into the story. The annihilation of Carthage by Rome was, in Virgil's time, one of the

Venus, Love Goddess and Aeneas's Protector

The Roman goddess Venus began as a minor deity who, evidence suggests, watched over vegetable gardens. After Greek settlers erected cities in southern Italy and began influencing Roman culture, however, the Romans started equating Venus with the prominent Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite. In this form, she developed a wide following and had temples built for her across Italy, the most important one being on the Capitoline Hill in Rome. Worshippers frequently portrayed her as the consort, or companion, of Mars, god of war. Her symbols were doves, dolphins, and roses. In Roman mythology, Venus appeared in the same stories that Aphrodite did in Greek mythology, since the Romans incorporated these tales into their own culture. However, the most important Roman myth in which she took part was strictly Roman—the story of Aeneas, as told in Virgil's great epic poem the *Aeneid.* In it, she helps the title character escape from Troy after its demise, and later she both protects him from harm and causes the Carthaginian queen, Dido, to fall in love with him.

key events in recent Roman history. The Romans and Carthaginians had faced off in two devastating conflicts in the 200s B.C.—the First and Second Punic Wars. Rome had won these conflicts, but had lost hundreds of thousands of men in the process. As a result, most Romans came to hate Carthage and its people. So when, in the following century, a Roman senator named Cato repeatedly demanded that "Carthage must be destroyed!"[19] Rome provoked a third conflict with its archenemy. In 146 B.C. a Roman army invaded Africa, burned Carthage to the ground, sold the surviving citizens into slavery, and plowed salt into the nearby farmlands to render them useless.

Most Romans of Virgil's day looked back on these harsh acts as justified, indeed, as having been ordained by fate and the gods. Knowing this, Virgil injected into this section of Aeneas's story a powerful feeling of divine will at work. He had Juno try to save the future Carthage by mustering up a violent storm that would, she hoped, sink Aeneas's ships before he could make the all-important Italian landfall. In Virgil's words,

Darkness [descended] on the deep, thunder shackled the poles, the air crackled with fire, everywhere death was at the sailor's elbow, [and] terror played fast and loose with Aeneas [and his people]. . . . The waves towered to the stars. The oars were smashed, the bow yawed . . . and a huge mountain of toppling water battered [the vessels] on the beams. . . . Survivors were spotted struggling in the [wreckage of ships] and of Troy's treasures bobbing through the waves.[20]

Fortunately for Aeneas, he and some of his followers survived the disaster and managed to land their ships on a nearby shore. They soon learned that they had landed near prosperous Carthage. Departing the ships, Aeneas and a few of his men entered the city and gained audience with its

Aeneas tells the story of the fall of Troy to Dido, queen of Carthage.

queen, Dido. In an unexpected turn of events, she fell in love with him practically on sight. In Virgil's words, she was "awestruck" by his "hero's aspect [look]."[21]

Dido threw a huge feast to welcome the visitors, and in the midst of the festivities she asked Aeneas to recount his recent adventures to her and the nobles of her court. Start from the beginning, she pleaded, and explain how he had escaped the catastrophe of mighty Troy's demise. In the modern version of the tale by mythologist Michael Stapleton, the eloquent Aeneas recalled how

> the Greeks [had] built a huge wooden horse, which they left outside the gates of Troy. The Trojans found the plain outside the city deserted and the Greek ships gone. [A Greek named Sinon] confirmed that the siege [had] ended and he told the Trojans that the wooden horse was an offering to [the goddess] Minerva, [and believing him, the Trojans] opened the gates of Troy and took the wooden horse into their city. That night [they] gave themselves up to feasting to celebrate the end of the war. Sinon slipped away and opened a trapdoor in the horse's belly and out crept . . . a band of Greeks. They murdered the sentries and threw open the gates to admit the Greek army, which had been lying in wait. [Aeneas] awoke to find the city in flames. [He] hurried to his home where he found his father Anchises [and his family] still alive. He hoisted his father on his shoulder and took his son, Ascanius, by the hand. [They] and a [small] band of Trojans who had managed to escape from the city, built a fleet of ships and sailed [away].[22]

A Series of Prophecies

As Aeneas continued to recall the recent past, he told his listeners how, on leaving the burning Troy, he and his followers had sailed southwestward to the small Aegean island of Delos. There, he consulted an oracle—a priestess who transmitted the words of a god to people. The divine message Aeneas received came from the god of prophecy, Apollo,

who indicated that the wayward band of Trojans should seek out their ancient mother. When the man inquired what the words "ancient mother" meant, the oracle replied that it was the land from which their distant ancestors had originally come.

Aeneas pondered long and hard on what the deity had said. Finally he decided that the ancient motherland Apollo had mentioned might be the large Aegean island of Crete, so he took his followers there. Not long after they had landed, however, Apollo sent them another communication. This one said, "There is a place the Greeks have called Hesperia, the western land." It is "an ancient country powerful in war and rich of soil." Also, the people who dwell there call themselves "Italians, after Italus, one of their leaders. There

Like Jason and the Argonauts before him, Aeneas and his companions fight against winged creatures called Harpies, which predict that Aeneas will eventually go to Italy.

Cato's Hatred

Cato the Elder, who had fought in the Second Punic War, came to hate the Carthaginians with a passion and considered their very existence a potential threat to Rome's well-being. That is why he always ended his speeches by saying "Carthage must be destroyed."

lies your true home."[23] In this manner, Aeneas came to realize that he was fated to travel to Italy and make a fresh start there for himself and his people.

The Trojan band headed for distant Italy and on the way there landed on an island to gather supplies. Finding some cows, they slaughtered and cooked them and then sat down to eat. Suddenly, however, they were assaulted by a group of repulsive, foul-smelling, birdlike creatures known as Harpies. The squealing fiends swooped down onto the people and ruined the food by covering it with a stinking liquid seemingly squirted from their glands.

Like other Roman myth-tellers, Virgil borrowed various characters from Greek mythology, among them the Harpies. Perhaps the earliest major Greek myth in which these disgusting beings appear is the story of Jason and the Golden Fleece. A hero searching for the magical skin of a ram, Jason had gathered together a group of mighty warriors, including the famous strongman Heracles (the Roman Hercules), and sailed on the *Argo*. Hence, they became known as the Argonauts. While searching for the fleece, they came to an island where an old man was starving because a flock of Harpies kept fouling his food. So they chased the creatures away. Indeed, the Argonauts would have killed the Harpies had not the creatures' sister Iris, goddess of the rainbow, appeared and begged the men to reconsider.

In a like manner, Virgil had Aeneas and his followers drive the sickening bird-beings away. At the same time, however, the fleeing Harpies delivered a prophecy. They predicted that Aeneas would make it to Italy, all right, but that he would not be able to create a city or country of his own unless hunger forced him to eat his tables.

For the moment, Aeneas could not fathom what this prophecy might mean. Certainly, he thought, he would never be so hungry that he would eat a table! In any case, the Harpies were no longer a problem, so the Trojans continued their westward journey.

Eventually, they reached the shores of the island of Sicily, where, not long after they had landed, Aeneas's father, Anchises, died. The members of the group were still grieving for the kindly old man when the storm Juno had summoned up struck them. That terrible tempest drove them off course, and in this way, Aeneas explained, they found themselves in Queen Dido's hospitable land of Carthage.

The Sibyl of Cumae

Thus ended Aeneas's tale to Dido and her guests. After hearing of the Trojan prince's adventures, the queen found herself even more in love with him than she had been before. So she pleaded with him to stay with her. She proved very persuasive, for Aeneas actually began to seriously consider her offer.

Seemingly out of nowhere, however, the messenger god Mercury, sent by Jupiter, appeared and warned the Trojan leader not to give in to his beautiful host. "What are you doing?" Mercury demanded of Aeneas. "Why do you linger here in North Africa?" At the least, the god said, the man should think about his young son, Ascanius, because "the realm of Italy and the Roman inheritance are his due."[24]

Mercury's words did the trick. Aeneas immediately ordered his followers to prepare to sail for Italy. Hurt and furious, Dido lashed out, called him a traitor, and in her anger screamed that she hoped the gods would cause his ships to be smashed on some rocks. Moreover, she pronounced a curse, saying that Aeneas's descendants and the future Carthaginians would always hate and oppose one another. (Here, Virgil was providing a mythical motive for the very real Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage.)

Shortly after leaving Carthage, the Trojans landed at Cumae, in southwestern Italy. A prophet had earlier informed Aeneas that upon reaching Italy he should locate the Sibyl, a mysterious woman who had the ability to see future events. This Sibyl was only one of several such gifted women depicted in Roman mythology. Like some of the Greek oracles, the Roman Sibyls passed on the prophecies of Apollo, whom both the Greeks and Romans knew by the

same name. Typically, when questioned by a religious pilgrim, a Sibyl went into a trance and uttered the god's words. Priests wrote them down and kept them. Over time, the sayings of the most-renowned Sibyl—the one who lived at Cumae—were collected as the famous Sibylline Books, which the Romans long preserved as holy objects. (They were kept in a chest hidden beneath Rome's Temple of Jupiter. Apparently they were destroyed when that building was sacked by invaders in the fifth century A.D.)

Aeneas found the Sibyl of Cumae deep inside a dark cave not far from the local Temple of Apollo. Wearing a long black robe, she greeted him as if she knew him, which did not surprise him since, after all, she *was* a prophetess. In a cryptic tone, she told him that the lovely, fertile plain of Latium, lying many miles north of Cumae, was his ultimate goal. There he must try to establish his new kingdom. Unfortunately for Aeneas, she continued, the powerful goddess Juno was still determined to stop him. As a result, he was also destined to fight a ruinous war over the right to marry an Italian bride.

Aeneas thanked the Sibyl and before departing requested another favor from her. Could she help him find a path into the Underworld so that one last time he might see his dearly loved father, who had recently passed away? To the man's surprise, the prophetess did more than show him the way to the nether realm of the dead. She also accompanied him in the journey downward into darkness. In time, Aeneas saw the shades, or souls, of numerous people. Among them was Queen Dido, who out of grief for losing Aeneas, had taken her own life after he had left Carthage. Saddened by the sight of her shade, the man tried to apologize. But in Virgil's words, "with her head averted, and eyes fixed on the ground, [she] flung herself away and fled into the shadows."[25]

Mere minutes after Dido's retreat, Aeneas came upon the shade of his father. Anchises hugged his son and then offered to give him a quick peek at the future of the noble race Aeneas would soon establish. "I shall show you the whole span of our destiny," Anchises declared. In fair Latium, Aeneas's descendants would build the city of Alba Longa, and the line of Alba's rulers would lead to a man named Romulus. To Romulus would fall the honor of founding a city called Rome. The old man added, "Our glorious Rome shall rule the whole wide world, and her spirit shall match the spirit of the gods."[26]

Anchises also showed Aeneas the lengthy line of future Roman heroes and leaders, a list that reached its grand summit in the person of the noble Caesar Augustus. He will be "a child of the Divine," Anchises said, "who shall [bring about] a golden age for Latium."[27] Clearly, this reference to Augustus, whom Virgil knew personally, was meant to heap honor on the first emperor. The poet had drawn a most flattering

Jupiter—Victor and Father of Heaven

As Virgil tells it in his *Aeneid,* the god Jupiter decrees that Aeneas will travel to Italy and there bring into being a new and noble race—the Romans. The leading divinity in the Roman state pantheon, Jupiter originated as an Italian sky god who supposedly brought rain to parched fields and caused thunder and lightning. Over time, however, he grew increasingly powerful in Roman religion and mythology. During the Monarchy (according to tradition 753–509 B.C.), the cult of Jupiter *Optimus Maximus* (Jupiter the "Best and Greatest") developed. At this point, Jupiter was part of the Capitoline Triad, a trio of deities that also included his divine wife, Juno, and Minerva, goddess of wisdom and war. The main temple dedicated to the Triad was situated atop Rome's Capitoline Hill. Besides *Optimus Maximus,* Jupiter possessed other manifestations, or forms, including *Invictus* (Invincible), *Divis pater* (Father of Heaven), *Latialis* (Leader of the Latin Feast), *Fugurator* (Sender of Lightning), and *Triumphator* (Victor). Each had its followers, temples, rituals, and so forth.

A North African forum with three temples consecrated to the Capitoline Triad cult of the gods Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. The cult developed during the Monarchy of 753–509 B.C.

parallel between Aeneas and Augustus. Not only were both men heroes of the fatherland, Virgil said, but each had been responsible for a momentous Roman founding—the Roman race by Aeneas, and the Roman Empire by Augustus.

"War Shall Cease"

Upon returning to the world's surface, Aeneas and the Sibyl bade each other farewell and, eager to fulfill the destiny foretold for him, the man headed for Latium. When he and his followers sailed up the Tiber River, situated near the wide Latium plain, they stopped to eat. They felt so famished that after finishing their meal they devoured the thin bread-cakes they were using as platters. In a sudden flash of understanding, Aeneas interpreted these as their "tables" and realized that the Harpies' prophecy had been fulfilled.

In the weeks and months that followed, Aeneas made the acquaintance of the local ruler, Latinus, and asked for the hand in marriage of his daughter, Lavinia. However, a nobleman from a neighboring people, the Rutulians, a man named Turnus, also desired to marry the princess. The competition between the two suitors quickly led to a bloody conflict. In another sudden realization, Aeneas saw that the Sibyl's prophecy—that he would fight a war over an Italian bride—had been fulfilled.

The hostilities carried on a long time. Finally, Aeneas and Turnus faced each other in single combat, in the same way that Aeneas had met Achilles on the battlefield outside Troy long before. As one modern myth-teller phrases it,

> Like two bulls they met, Aeneas and Turnus, horn to horn and shield to shield, struggling for footing, swords flashing and then locked to the hilt, forehead to forehead. . . . Blow after blow they landed until the blood flowed from a hundred cuts. Then Turnus lifted his sword in what he hoped would be the final stroke, but Aeneas caught the blow glancing on his shield, and the weapon broke. . . . As Turnus shook his head to clear his vision, Aeneas raised [his] spear and hurled it [and] the sharp point pierced the seven layers of Turnus's shield and penetrated his thigh.[28]

Aeneas soon dispatched the wounded Turnus, which brought the war to a swift end. The one-time Trojan prince now proceeded to marry Lavinia and to found a city—called Lavinium after his new bride. Thereafter, through the happy couple, the merger of the Trojan and Latin races produced a family line fated to create a completely new race—the Romans. As Jupiter had earlier ordained, the Romans would one day take their rightful place in the forefront of human nations. "The great Trojan line," the father of the gods declared (in Virgil's words), would lead to rulers whose fame would extend "to the last star" in the heavens. "The bitter

centuries of war shall cease then, [and] the world [will] grow mild at last. . . . So it is willed."[29] In this way, the Roman race was finally established. Still to be accomplished, however, were the actual founding of the eternal city of Rome and just when that pivotal act would take place. Only mythical time would tell.

Romulus and the Founding of Rome

From the years of the mid-Republic to the very end of the Empire, every Roman knew the mythical tales of Romulus, the legendary founder and first king of Rome. Of these stories, one told of Romulus's miraculous survival as an infant, along with his twin brother, Remus. In a nutshell, they were said to be the grandchildren of Numitor, king of Alba Longa in Latium and a descendant of Aeneas. Shortly after the twins were born, Numitor's own twin brother, Amulius, stole Alba's throne from Numitor and ordered the infants to be drowned in the Tiber River. Fortunately for them (and the future Romans), however, they washed ashore and a she-wolf suckled and protected them, thereby keeping them alive. Eventually, some local shepherds found the babies, took them in, and raised them.

Origins of the Romulus Myths

Researchers in all ages wanted to know more about Romulus's stories, particularly where they originated. Livy was one of the two leading ancient tellers of the myths about Romulus. The other was the first-century A.D. Greek writer Plutarch, who included a biography of Romulus in his *Parallel Lives.* (That famous work, most of which survives,

is a collection of biographies of well-known Greeks and Romans who lived before or during Plutarch's lifetime.) Of course, many Romans took the Romulus stories at face value, since they believed Romulus had been a real person who had established Rome in the distant past. In contrast, scholars in later eras concluded that Romulus was a mythical character and sought the origins of his tales.

Although those origins are still somewhat shadowy, modern experts have managed to piece together at least some shreds of evidence to enlighten the darkness. First, sometime in the sixth century B.C., the Greeks began incorporating a character named Romus into their myths. He seems to have been a roving city-founder. Evidently the early Romans heard about Romus and adopted him, calling him Romulus. But those Greeks who lived in southern Italy insisted that the two were separate characters. As a result, a new tradition involving both characters formed, one claiming they were twin brothers. Moreover, at some point the Romans started calling Romulus's brother Remus

Fabius Pictor was the first to write of the myth of the infants Romulus and Remus, who were saved and suckled by a she-wolf.

instead of Romus, marking the emergence of the tale of Romulus and Remus. The first major written version of the twins' myth was that of the early Roman historian Fabius Pictor in the 200s B.C. Also, in that same century an image of the twins and the female wolf who initially raised them appeared on a Roman coin.

As for the main elements of the twins' survival story, early Roman storytellers, who were not very inventive, seem to have borrowed them from existing myths of various peoples. For example, the idea of coldhearted individuals casting babies adrift in rivers or exposing them to the elements was quite common in European and Middle Eastern folklore. One of the earliest versions, if not *the* earliest, was the tale of the Mesopotamian conqueror Sargon, dating from the third millennium (2000s) B.C. As an infant, the story goes, he was placed in a basket, which was tossed into the Euphrates River. The famous Hebrew version, from the Old Testament, substituted Moses for Sargon and the Nile for the Euphrates. In addition, in Greek mythology both Oedipus of Thebes and the hero Perseus were left outside to die as babies but managed to survive. There was nothing new, therefore, about the section of the Roman version in which Romulus and his brother are left to drown in the Tiber.

Similarly, the Roman myth-tellers borrowed the episode with the she-wolf from the folktales of other cultures. Indeed, stories in which wolves or other wild animals nurtured or raised human children were numerous in ancient times. In Mesopotamian mythology, for instance, which predated Roman myths by many centuries, the hero Gilgamesh encounters and eventually befriends Enkidu, a wild man who had been raised by some unidentified creatures. The Greek god Zeus was another example. Supposedly, after his mother hid him in Crete, to avoid the wrath of his father, Cronos, he was nursed for a while by a she-goat. Also in Greek mythology, it was said that the formidable female hunter Atalanta was abandoned in the wilderness as a baby and briefly nurtured by a female bear. The Trojan prince Paris, too, was nursed by a bear, and Persian legends claimed that Cyrus, founder of the Persian Empire, was initially raised by a dog.

The House of Romulus Found?

Very little evidence from Rome's earliest centuries was uncovered until the 1930s, when archaeologists discovered the remnants of some crude ancient huts atop Rome's Palatine Hill. Initial analysis suggested that these dwellings were in use in the eighth century B.C. That was the era in which the legendary Romulus supposedly erected Rome's first defensive wall and the houses and other structures making up the infant city of Rome. The question for the excavators was whether the evidence fit the narrative of the myth. One interesting find at the site was a hut that had been repeatedly repaired over the course of many centuries, suggest-ing that it was significant in some way. It was already known that the later Romans maintained a sort of shrine they called the *Casa Romuli,* or "House of Romulus." It was damaged by storms and fires on several occasions and always afterward restored to its former state. Indeed, this hut was seen as significant enough that the first emperor, Augustus, built his own house near it. His motivation may have been to show the people that he had close ties to the city's founder. Some experts think that the hut excavated in the 1930s and the one periodically rebuilt at government expense during the late Republic and Empire may be one and the same.

These incidents were all mythical, but the ancients accepted them in part because they knew of occasional accounts of real feral (wild) children. One was recorded by the usually dependable Roman historian Procopius. A baby boy, he said, abandoned by his mother during the chaos of the Gothic wars in about A.D. 250, was found and suckled by a she-goat. Some villagers found the boy living with his adopted mother and named him Aegisthus. Procopius stated that he saw the child himself, saying,

> The infant, being thus abandoned, began to cry. But a lone she-goat, seeing it, felt pity and came near, and gave the infant her udder . . . and guarded [the child] carefully, lest a dog or wild beast should injure it. And since the confusion was long continued, it came about that the infant partook of this food for a very long time. [Some people took the child and goat in, and later] when I happened to be [visiting] that place, by way of making a display of the strange sight they

took me near the infant and purposely hurt it so that it might cry out . . . whereupon the goat, which was standing about a stone's throw away from it, hearing the cry, came running and bleating loudly to its side, and took [a position standing] over it, so that no one might be able to hurt it again.[30]

Aiding the Rightful King

Even though a number of aspects of the myths associated with Romulus were unoriginal, these stories steadily took on a life of their own. At least from the mid-third century B.C. on, they gained in popularity in the Roman heartland in Italy. By the first century B.C., average Romans spoke about Romulus with the same keen interest and tone of reverence as modern Americans do about America's founding fathers. Livy's and Plutarch's subsequent written tellings of these myths cemented them in a sense into an official version that has come down to the present.

In that version, after surviving the ordeal on the river and living for a while with the wolves, the two young boys were raised by a shepherd or farmer named Faustulus. Somehow he knew their real identities. As they grew, Plutarch wrote, they became both physically strong and highly ethical and used both of those positive attributes to help those in need:

> They both proved brave and manly, attempting all enterprises that seemed hazardous, and showing in them a courage altogether undaunted. But Romulus seemed rather to . . . show the [wisdom] of a statesman, and in all his dealings with their neighbors, whether relating to feeding of flocks or to hunting, gave the idea of being born rather to rule than to obey. To their comrades and inferiors they were therefore dear. . . . They used honest pastimes and liberal studies, not esteeming sloth and idleness . . . but rather such exercises as hunting and running, repelling robbers, [chasing down] thieves, and delivering the wronged and oppressed from injury. For doing such things they became famous.[31]

In one version of the myth of Rome's origins, Romulus and Remus are taken from the she-wolf by the farmer Faustulus and reared by him and his wife Acca Larentia.

For a long time, Faustulus kept the secret that the young men were the grandsons of the deposed king Numitor and great nephews of the usurper, Amulius. But eventually, as Livy said, he felt that "the truth could no longer be concealed," and "he told Romulus the whole story." Meanwhile, someone else told Numitor that his grandsons were still alive. Two groups of men, one led by Romulus, the other by Remus, attacked and killed King Amulius, after which Numitor called a meeting of the local people. He "laid the facts before" them, Livy continued, including "Amulius's crime . . . the birth of his grandsons [and] how they were brought up and ultimately recognized." Then "the two brothers marched through the crowd at the head of their men and saluted their grandfather as the [rightful] king, and by a shout of unanimous consent, his royal title was confirmed."[32]

A Disastrous Quarrel

Happy that they had been able to set things right in Alba Longa, Romulus and Remus set out to create a new city of their own on the northern edge of the Latium plain. In ancient times, Latium was bordered by the Mediterranean Sea to the west, the Apennine Mountains to the east, the Tiber River to the north, and the volcanic region of Campania to the south. Romulus's myths aside, modern scholars have shown that well before Rome's rise to power the Latin tribes who initially settled on the plain fashioned a political alliance—the Latin League. Its purpose was to thwart attacks by the Etruscans, whose cities were located north of Rome. Later the league opposed the Romans themselves, for after the Republic formed and became an aggressive power, Rome moved against the Latins in an effort to seize all of Latium. By Livy's day—the late first

According to legend, Romulus and Remus established a city on seven hills of the north Latium plain, but when the two quarreled over which of them would be king, Romulus killed Remus.

century B.C.—Latium lay at the heart of the still-expanding Roman realm and most of the old Latin towns in the area had fallen into ruin.

The twins felt that the northern edge of the Latium plain, where a cluster of low hills arose, seemed like the perfect place to establish their city. Both approached the venture with great zeal and optimism. As fate would have it, however, Romulus turned out to be the sole founder, as he and Remus had a quarrel that ended with disastrous results. In Livy's words,

> As the brothers were twins and all questions of seniority were thereby precluded [ruled out], they determined to ask the gods of the countryside to declare . . . which of them should govern the new town once it was founded, and give his name to it. . . . Remus, the story goes, was the first to receive a sign—six vultures [in some accounts eagles]. And no sooner was this made known to the people than double the number of birds appeared to Romulus. The followers of each promptly saluted their masters as king. . . . Angry words ensued, followed all too soon by blows, and in the course of the fray Remus was killed.[33]

Both Plutarch and Livy mention an alternate myth in which Remus leapt over a half-built wall that Romulus was working on. In this version, Romulus saw this move as disrespectful, grew angry, and struck his brother, killing him. Either way, Remus was suddenly out of the picture. Since Romulus was now the sole founder, the city was named for him.

Laying Out the City

Romulus soon realized that raising an entire city was too big a job for himself and the handful of men who followed him. So he sent for masons, carpenters, laborers, and other experts from Etruria, the Etruscan region lying to the north. These

Saving Jupiter

According to the Roman version of a famous Greek myth, Jupiter's father, Saturn, swallowed each of his many children right after they were born. But Saturn's wife, Cybele, eventually outwitted him. When she gave birth to Jupiter, she wrapped a rock in linen and gave it to Saturn, who, thinking it was the baby, swallowed it. She then secretly sent Jupiter to Crete for safekeeping.

This Etruscan red figure krater (vase) depicts Athena and Poseidon with other gods. By borrowing ideas from the Etruscans, the Romans indirectly adopted many facets of Greek culture.

workers and advisers not only showed him how to lay out streets and create foundations for buildings, but also how to conduct religious ceremonies to honor the gods. It was imperative, they said, to get on the deities' good sides in order to ensure that the community would thrive and endure.

The incidents in Romulus's story involving Etruscan advisers and experts reflect the fact that during Rome's early centuries the Etruscans exerted a powerful cultural influence on Roman society. The Etruscan city-states, which saw themselves as separate nations within the Etruscan cultural sphere, were at this time considerably more culturally advanced than the Romans. Their towns had well-laid-out streets, stone public buildings containing arches and other

architectural refinements, sewer drains to remove wastes, large-scale temples to honor the gods, and other advances that Rome initially lacked. Impressed by their neighbors from the north, over time the Romans borrowed these and other aspects of Etruscan culture.

It is important to emphasize that in borrowing from the Etruscans, the Romans were indirectly adopting various facets of Greek culture. This is because the Etruscans had earlier borrowed heavily from Greek traders and settlers who had arrived in Italy beginning in the seventh century B.C. Indeed, this process was particularly marked in the area of religion. Etruria lent Rome some of its deities, which in turn had been based on Greek models. As T.J. Cornell points out, both the Etruscans and Romans "sought to equate their own gods and goddesses with appropriate figures from the Greek pantheon. Thus, the Greek [messenger god] Hermes = Etruscan Turms = Roman Mercury; the Greek [goddess of love] Aphrodite = Etruscan Turan = Roman Venus; the Greek [god of the forge] Hephaestos = Etruscan Sethlans = Roman Vulcan, etc."[34]

Moreover, before the Greeks came along, both the Etruscans and Romans worshipped invisible, formless nature spirits. The Greeks introduced anthropomorphic gods—that is, deities with human physical form and personalities—to the Etruscans. The latter then introduced them to the Romans.

These Etruscan influences were naturally reflected in Rome's developing myths, including the tales about Romulus. Thus, his Etruscan advisers showed him how to mark the boundaries of the new town, how to erect temples, and so forth. According to Plutarch, "As for the day they began to build the city, it is universally agreed to have been the twenty-first of April, and that day the Romans annually keep holy, calling it their country's birthday. At first, they say, they sacrificed no living creature on this day, thinking it fit to preserve the feast of their country's birthday pure and without stain of blood."[35]

Dating the Founding

The later Romans took this national birthday quite seriously. For a long time they celebrated it each year on April 21, but they were unsure about the exact year that Romulus had

begun work on the city. As a result, throughout most of the Republic the Romans employed several different calendars and dating systems, none of which was very accurate.

It was not until the first century B.C. that a widely respected scholar, Marcus Terentius Varro, devised a dating system that introduced a firm date for Romulus's founding act. Appropriately, this system reckoned events "from the city's founding"—in Latin, *ab urbe condita*, abbreviated AUC. Varro declared that Romulus had begun erecting Rome in 1 AUC, 244 years before the expulsion of the last Roman king and the creation of the Republic. Therefore, the Republic was established in 244 AUC. Similarly, Varro said he himself had been born 393 years after the Republic's founding, or in 637 AUC.

The more familiar dating system that uses B.C., or "before Christ," and A.D., or *anno Domini* ("in the year of the Lord"), was devised some six centuries after Varro's death. An early medieval Christian monk named Dionysius Exiguus estimated that Jesus Christ had been born in the year 754 AUC and called that year A.D. 1 in the new chronology. By Dionysius's reckoning, Varro had been born in 116 B.C.; the Republic had been established in 509 B.C.; and Romulus had founded Rome 753 years before the year A.D. 1, or in 753 B.C. Dionysius also determined that in his new dating system, which subsequently became the Christian Church's official one, the year in which he introduced it was A.D. 525.

Romulus's City Grows

Romulus himself was far too busy to worry about dating systems, as the creation of his new city required him to formulate several complicated legal, social, and religious institutions. For example, "he summoned his subjects and gave them laws," Livy wrote, since without laws "a unified people and government would not have been possible." Also, the founder realized that he needed to populate the new city with as many people as he could find who were looking to make a clean start in life. "In antiquity," Livy went on,

the founder of a new settlement, in order to increase its population, would as a matter of course [round] up a lot of homeless and destitute folk and pretend

they were "born of earth" to be his progeny [offspring]. Romulus now followed a similar course. To help fill up his big new town, he [made it] a place of asylum for fugitives. Here fled for refuge all the [outcasts] from the neighboring peoples, some free, some slaves, and all of them wanting nothing more than a fresh start. That mob was the first real addition to the city's strength, the first step toward her future greatness.[36]

Romulus was pleased that so many people flocked to his new town; however, it did not take long for him to realize that there was one serious drawback to the process. Namely, nearly all of the initial settlers were men. Clearly, Rome would not continue to grow unless a majority of these men could find brides with whom to start families.

In order to populate his new city, Romulus, on horseback, welcomed the homeless and the destitute, as well as refugees from neighboring towns.

Temple Architecture

Both the Romans and Etruscans borrowed the basics of temple architecture from the Greeks, including a rectangular structure with front and back porches, triangular pediments located above the porches, and vertical columns stretching part or all the way around the inner structure and supporting the roof.

According to one of the principal myths associated with Romulus, he developed a daring plan that he hoped would solve his dilemma. He sent word to the inhabitants of several neighboring towns that Rome was planning a big religious festival that would feature some exciting athletic games and theatrical performances. The residents of these towns, lying northeast of Rome, were members of an early Latin people known as the Sabines.

The myths about Romulus aside, the Sabines seem to have played an important role in Rome's early growth. For instance, a number of the original patrician families that made up the city-state's first semblance of a noble class seem to have come from Sabine stock. Probably the most famous example was Attus Clausus, from the Sabine town of Regillus. After moving to the infant Rome, he established the noble Claudian family line that over time produced several senators and eventually the emperors Tiberius (reigned A.D. 14–37) and Claudius (41–54). Many other early Sabines moved to Rome, while most of the Sabine towns became trading partners with the early Romans, helping the latter enjoy economic growth.

Because Sabine culture contributed so much to early Rome's success, one would expect the Sabines to feature prominently in Roman myths. This was indeed the case, as demonstrated by Romulus's invitation to the Sabines and what happened when they accepted it. At the height of the festivities, each of the Roman men suddenly seized the nearest young Sabine woman and carried her away to his house. The girls' parents fled back to their towns and told their countrymen what had happened. The next day Romulus sent word to the Sabine leaders that the young women were in no danger. In fact, they would be well treated as the wives of Roman men.

The Sabines rejected these words, however, and in an effort to retrieve their kidnapped daughters they launched a war against Rome. Many months of intermittent fighting finally led up to an enormous battle that raged on the flat

ground between the Palatine and Capitoline Hills and many men on both sides were slain. Then, suddenly, the combatants were surprised to see the young women who had earlier been seized dashing out into the midst of the fray. As Plutarch told it,

> The daughters of the Sabines, who had been carried off, came running, in great confusion, some on this side, some on that, with miserable cries and lamentations. Like creatures possessed, [they moved] in the midst of the army and among the dead bodies, to come at their husbands and their fathers. . . . All [were] calling, now upon the Sabines, now upon the Romans, in the most tender and endearing words. Hereupon [the men on] both [sides] melted into compassion, and fell back, to make room for them betwixt the armies. The sight of the women carried sorrow and [pity] upon both sides into the hearts of all.[37]

Jacques-Louis David's 1799 painting depicts the battle between the Romans and the Sabines, during which the Sabine women interceded between the two armies.

"As Doves Flee the Eagle"

Several ancient Greco-Roman writers besides Livy wrote about the mythical incident in which Roman men seized the Sabine women. Among them was the poet Ovid, who said in his work The Art of Love,

[T]he Roman men] watched, and each with his eye observed the girl he wanted, and trembled greatly in his silent heart. [Soon] the king gave the watched-for signal for the [seizure to begin]. They sprang up straightaway, showing their intent by shouting, and eagerly took possession of the women. As doves flee the eagle, in a frightened crowd . . . so [the women] fled in panic from the lawless men, and . . . now they all fear as one, but not with one face of fear. Some tear their hair. Some sit there, all will lost. One mourns silently, another cries for her mother in vain. One moans, one faints, one stays, while [another] one runs. The captive girls were led away, a joyful prize, and many made even fear itself look fitting. Whoever showed too much fight, and denied her lover, he held her clasped high to his loving heart, and said to her: "Why mar your tender cheeks with tears? as your father to your mother, I'll be to you."

Ovid. *The Art of Love.* Translated by A.S. Kline. www.poetryintranslation.com /PITBR/Latin/ArtofLoveBkI.htm#_Toc521049260.

The women explained that they could not simply stand by and watch their fathers, brothers, and husbands destroy one another. They demanded that the two sides negotiate a treaty, which was done. Thereafter, the Romans and Sabines patched up their differences and one of the Sabine kings, Titus Tatius, actually ruled Rome jointly with Romulus.

A Talent for Reasonableness

The mythical treaty with the Sabines may have been based on a real early agreement between the two peoples. The Romans did sign numerous treaties of this sort over the course of the

Republic and may well have done so during the Monarchy. In fact, even more than the strength of their army, the key to the Romans' success was their gift for political negotiation and conciliation. In most cases, instead of treating former enemies ruthlessly or unkindly, they made treaties with them and granted them Roman citizenship and legal privileges.

In this way, over time those opponents became allies and some even became "Romanized," further adding to Rome's strength. The Romans had "a talent for patient political reasonableness that was unique in the ancient world," Michael Grant wrote. "On the whole, Rome found it advisable . . . to keep its bargains with its allies, displaying a self-restraint, a readiness to compromise, and a calculated generosity that the world had never seen. And so the allies, too, had little temptation to feel misused."[38]

Thus, more than anything else, Romulus's myth was a fictional representation of real qualities and practices that helped make Rome great. "The Roman foundation legend," Cornell points out,

> defines the identity of the Roman people as a mixture of different ethnic groups, and of Roman culture as the product of various foreign influences. . . . The Roman saga was characteristic of a people who had built up their power by extending their citizenship and continuously admitting new elements into their midst. [Indeed] we can well understand why the Romans were not ashamed to admit that Romulus's followers included runaways and exiles from many lands.[39]

Seven Champions of Early Rome

Both the Greeks and Romans had mythical tales of human heroes; however, the sources of those champions and the settings in which they lived and performed their legendary deeds were very different. Almost all of the Greek heroes—characters like Heracles, Theseus, Perseus, and Jason—had existed in the remote, vaguely remembered, and largely mythical Age of Heroes. Long time spans, the history of which remained unknown and mysterious, separated that ancient age from the inhabitants of historical Greece.

In contrast, Rome's well-remembered early champions had lived and earned their sterling reputations during Rome's founding centuries—the years of the Monarchy and early Republic. That gave these heroic figures a feeling of immediacy and relevancy that the Greek mythical heroes sometimes lacked. This is partly why Livy, Plutarch, and other major ancient myth-tellers usually did not present the Roman myths as fiction. Rather, they portrayed them as part of the early history of the Roman people, a history that was still unfolding in their own day.

Therefore, these early stories of the heroes of the Roman state were seen as having instructive value for each new generation of Romans. Jane Gardner points out, for example, that

every Roman schoolboy was taught the legends of early history, which exemplified the virtues that the Romans liked to think were part of the essential Roman character, and stressed in particular the principle that the welfare of Rome must come before the desires of the individual, and even before loyalty to the family group. The noblest Roman families were particularly proud to include such stories in their family histories, and, at least during the Republic, continued for a long time to model their conduct upon them. Stories of this sort were a staple component of orations delivered at public funerals to inspire the young men to [imitate these old heroes].[40]

The three Horatii brothers take an oath to engage in combat with three Alban warriors to settle a dispute between Rome and the city of Alba Longa.

Six Brave Brothers

Among the most illustrious of these legendary Roman patriots were members of one of early Rome's noblest families, the Horatii [h' RAY-shee-eye]. According to Livy and other later myth-tellers, their deeds occurred during the reign of one of Rome's earliest kings, Tullus Hostilius. According to tradition, he ruled in the mid-600s B.C.

In those days, the story goes, Rome was in the midst of a conflict with the city-state of Alba Longa, which a few generations earlier had been the birthplace of Rome's founder, Romulus. Following Romulus's death, the two cities had remained on friendly terms for a long time. But in recent years groups of men from each place had been conducting cattle raids against the other, straining relations between the two peoples. It proved difficult to work out a settlement because each side felt it was in the right. Finally, King Tullus told the Alban ambassador (in Livy's version), "Our prayer is that the guilty nation may suffer all the misery of the coming war."[41]

Both the Romans and Albans gathered their armed men. As the two armies approached each other, the leaders—Tullus for the Romans and Mettius Fufetius for the Albans—met one last time to see if they could avoid major bloodshed. According to Livy, the two men agreed that it would be a shame if two peoples who were related by blood and culture tried to destroy each other. Also, they concurred that a war between Rome and Alba Longa would only serve to benefit their common enemy—the Etruscans. "They will be watching us," Mettius told Tullus, "ready, when we have worn each other out, to attack us both, victor and vanquished alike." Surely, Mettius added, "We should be able to find a better solution" than to inflict "crippling losses" on each other.[42]

To overcome their dilemma, Mettius and Tullus decided to have three handpicked soldiers from each side fight one another. The city-state to which the victorious trio belonged would become the master of the losing city-state. The three Romans chosen belonged to the Horatii family, while their opponents were members of an equally noble family—the Curiatii [coor-ee-AH-tee-eye].

On the allotted day, the two armies gathered to watch the selected champions fight. In Livy's words, "the trumpet blared." The six brave brothers drew their swords and

with all the pride of embattled armies advanced to the combat. Careless of death or danger, each thought only of his country's fate . . . which they themselves, and only they, were about to decide. They met. At the flash of steel and the clang of shield on shield, a thrill ran through the massed spectators. [Soon] the combatants were locked in a deadly grapple. Bodies writhed and twisted, the leaping blades parried and thrust, and blood began to flow.[43]

The last surviving Horatii brother slays all three Alba Longa warriors in the contest of champions. By the terms of the contest, Alba Longa became subordinate to Rome.

As the battle continued, two of the Horatii were killed, leaving their brother to face his three opponents by himself. In an incredible display of valor and fighting prowess, the young Roman killed all three of his opponents, turning what seemed like certain defeat into a surprising victory. Though disappointed, the Albans lived up to their side of the deal. From that day forward Alba Longa remained under Roman control.

Greek Myths Prove Fertile Ground

The later Romans believed that this battle of champions was a real event from their distant past, but historians are unsure whether early Roman armies actually staged such one-on-one (or in this case three-on-three) fights. It is possible that they did, as other such fights between champions were mentioned in Roman lore.

Still, a number of modern experts think these stories may have been fabricated. They point out that the Romans of the late Republic desperately wanted to appear as culturally and literarily advanced as the Greeks. In their efforts to acquire a respectable cultural veneer, they established connections with important Greek myths, especially, of course, those of the Trojan War. The chief ancient source for that conflict had been the Greek myth-teller Homer. In his epic poem the *Iliad* he had frequently described one-on-one contests between leading warriors.

The most famous of these fights was the one between Achilles, greatest of the Greek warriors who fought at Troy, and Hector, son of Troy's king, Priam. As in the story of the Horatii and Curiatii, the opposing armies gathered to watch their champions fight. According to Homer, Achilles looked "like the god of war in his flashing helmet, girt for battle," and "the bronze [armor] on his body glowed like a blazing fire or the rising sun."[44] Hector was equally formidable-looking in his own armor. The two champions clashed while their comrades in the army ranks cheered them on. Eventu-

Achilles's Heel

According to legend, most of Achilles's body could not be harmed. When he was an infant, his mother dipped him in the magical waters of the River Styx on the edge of the Underworld. Only his heel, by which she held him, did not touch the water and remained vulnerable to harm. It was in that heel that a Trojan poisoned arrow eventually found its mark, killing him.

ally, Achilles managed to gain the upper hand and drove his spear into his opponent's throat. Hector collapsed into the dust, and as Homer said, his shade fluttered away toward the realm of the dead.

If the story of the six brothers in the Roman myths is based on a true event, it is likely that the leaders who proposed that battle of champions were inspired by Homer. If, on the other hand, the fight between the Horatii and Curiatii was a fiction, its inventor also likely based it on the confrontation between Achilles and Hector or other such single combats in Homer's epics. Either way, Greek myths once more proved fertile ground for the impressionable Romans.

Horatius Holds the Bridge

The worries about the Etruscan threat expressed by Mettius and Tullus in the myth of the six brothers proved well-founded according to another renowned legend from Rome's early years. In the myth of the hero Horatius Cocles, an army commanded by Lars Porsenna, king of the powerful Etruscan city of Clusium, marched on Rome. Hearing that the Etruscans were advancing rapidly, thousands of Roman farmers left their fields and took refuge in the urban center occupying the seven hills near the Tiber River.

In those days the Roman government kept guards at intervals along the city-state's borders. Seeing the approach of Porsenna and his troops, these sentries lost their nerve and, like the farmers, fled to the central city. That left the way open for the Etruscans to cross Roman territory unopposed. Porsenna led his men toward the Sublician, the main wooden bridge spanning the Tiber and leading right into the heart of Rome.

At that fateful moment, a single man stood guard at the bridge. He was Horatius Cocles, whom Livy would later call the "great soldier whom the fortune of Rome gave to be her shield on that day of peril."[45] Horatius saw the last few Roman farmers and soldiers hurrying to cross the bridge to the imagined safety of the urban center. There would be no safety in Rome, for them or any other Roman, he told them, if they allowed the approaching enemy to cross the bridge. Keeping his wits about him, he explained that the bridge must be destroyed in

order to keep the Etruscans from entering the city. Run to the inner end of the bridge, he instructed them, and begin tearing it down. In the meantime, he would remain at his post on the outer end and hold off the enemy for as long as he could. As the farmers and soldiers hurried away to begin implementing the plan, Livy wrote, Horatius proudly took his stand,

Horatius Cocles, center, single-handedly fends off Etruscan warriors on the Sublician Bridge, while his fellow Romans destroy the bridge behind him.

sword and shield ready for action, preparing himself for close combat, one man against an army. The advancing enemy paused in sheer astonishment at such reckless courage. . . . With defiance in his eyes, he confronted the Etruscan cavalry, challenging one after another to single combat, and mocking them all as tyrants' slaves, who, careless of their own liberty, were coming to destroy the liberty of others. For a while they hung back, each waiting for his neighbor to make the first move, until shame at the unequal battle drove them to action.[46]

After Horatius had managed to kill several attackers in single combat, the Etruscans decided to assault him as a group. But by this time it was too late. The Romans on the far side of the bridge had succeeded in weakening its supports and the structure suddenly gave way and tumbled into the river. Horatius plunged with it into the raging waters below. The Etruscans were sure he was a goner, but a few seconds later they saw his head bob up. Desperately, they hurled their spears and shot their arrows at him, hoping to save some face by killing the man who had so badly humiliated them. However, Livy wrote, brave Horatius "made it safely to the other side, where his friends were waiting to receive him."[47] His grateful countrymen later commemorated his saving of the city by raising a statue of him in the main forum. Also, every Roman contributed a small amount of his yearly earnings to a fund set up to support Horatius for the rest of his days.

The First Professional Warrior

This mythical image of Horatius, a man rising to the occasion and standing up against seemingly impossible odds, became one of the traditional symbols of the Roman soldier. In the centuries that followed, the Roman fighting man acquired a formidable image and came to be feared by peoples across the known world. The valor, extensive training, and strict discipline of Roman troops was demonstrated not only by the records of their numerous battlefield victories, but also by the surviving accounts of reliable eyewitnesses. The first-century A.D. Jewish historian, Josephus, for instance, who saw the Roman army in action on several occasions, said,

> Anyone who will take a look at the organization of their army . . . will recognize that they hold their wide-flung empire as the prize of valor, not the gift of fortune. . . . No lack of discipline dislodges them from their regular formation, no panic incapacitates them, no toil wears them out. So victory over men not so trained follows as a matter of course. It would not be far from truth to call their drills bloodless battles, and their battles bloody drills.[48]

Similarly, it was not merely in myths that Roman fighters were highly flexible and able to adapt quickly to changing situations in battle. The dependable second-century B.C. Greek historian Polybius stated,

> Every Roman soldier, once he is armed and goes into action, can adapt himself equally well to any place or time and meet an attack from any quarter. He is likewise equally well-prepared and needs to make no change whether he has to fight with the main body [of the army] or with a detachment . . . or singly. Accordingly, since the effective use of the parts of the Roman army is so much superior, their plans are much more likely to achieve success than those of others.[49]

The bravery, discipline, resolve, and flexibility of the Roman soldier, combined with his first-rate training, made him a truly professional warrior in both myths and reality.

Coriolanus and His Mother

One of the greatest of those early professional Roman warriors was Gaius Marcius, who in later ages was better known as Coriolanus. He received this nickname in the following manner. A direct descendant of one of Rome's kings, Ancus Marcius, in the 490s B.C. Gaius fought for the newly formed Roman Republic in a number of battles and was awarded several citations for his bravery.

One of those battles took place in a war Rome fought against the Volscians. That warlike tribe from central Italy had recently begun to invade the Latium plain and to threaten Rome. In response, the Romans attacked the Volscian-held town of Corioli, and primarily because of Gaius's courage and determination they managed to capture it. Afterwards, the Roman commander proposed that Gaius be rewarded not only with money and weapons, but also with the honorary title of Coriolanus, after the name of the town he had captured. Plutarch later explained that in early Roman times men's third names were sometimes

> given because of some exploit, stroke of fortune . . . or notable virtue. [A] member of the Metellus family

Strict Discipline for Soldiers

In addition to their dedication and fighting skills, as exemplified by brave Horatius in his myth, Roman soldiers were effective and successful because they followed strict discipline. Take the example of guarding the Roman camp at night while on a military campaign. To make certain that the guards stayed awake while on this duty, each evening an officer handed a tablet on which a watchword had been written to each of the sentries in charge of the various guard posts. Also, four soldiers acting as inspectors patrolled the camp and checked up on the guards. The inspectors visited each post on the perimeter several times during the night. If a guard was awake, the inspector collected his tablet. If, however, the guard was asleep, the inspector did not collect that man's tablet, nor did he awaken the man. In the morning, the officer in charge of the guards counted the collected tablets and if one was missing, he knew it was because the man to which it had been assigned had fallen asleep at his post. That guard was severely punished.

was named Celer ("the Swift") because he managed to provide for the people funeral games [so quickly] that the speed . . . of his preparations was considered extraordinary. . . . The Romans [also] often give names because of physical peculiarities, and they choose not only such epithets as Sulla ("the Pimply") [and] Rufus ("the Red"), but also Cacus ("the Blind") and Claudius ("the Lame").[50]

Although Coriolanus was a skilled, valiant soldier, he was also a nobleman who viewed the common people as his inferiors. In one incident he made the mistake of insulting them in public, which moved some of them to accuse him of aspiring to become a tyrant. When talk of bringing him to trial on that charge began to circulate, he fled Rome. Because he was very bitter over the way his countrymen had treated him, he went to the camp of his old enemies, the Volscians, and offered them his services. They welcomed him and with his aid they prepared for a full-scale assault on Rome, to be led by Coriolanus himself. According to the popular early modern myth-teller Charles Morris,

The approach of this powerful army threw the Romans into dismay. They had been assailed so suddenly that they had made no preparations for defense, and the city seemed to lie at the mercy of its foes. The women ran to the temples to pray for the favor of the gods. The people demanded that the Senate should send deputies to the invading army to treat for peace. The Senate, apparently no less frightened than the people, obeyed, sending five leading patricians to the Volscian camp. [They] were haughtily received by Coriolanus, who offered them the following severe terms: "We will give you no peace till you restore to the Volscians all the land and cities which Rome has ever taken from them, and till you make them citizens of Rome, and give them all the rights in your city which you have yourselves."[51]

When the envoys returned and told the Romans about these harsh terms, the city fell into turmoil. The only citizens who seemed to remain calm were a small band of women headed by Coriolanus's own mother Volumnia. These women, accompanied by the traitor's wife and small children, made their way to the enemy camp and confronted him. What was he thinking, Volumnia demanded, abandoning his fatherland, family, and fellow citizens? "Let there be no doubt of this," she declared. "You shall never attack Rome unless you trample first upon the dead body of the mother who bore you." Hearing these words, Coriolanus broke down and for the first time in months thought clearly and realistically about himself and his country. "You have won your victory," he told his mother tenderly. "You have saved Rome. But you have destroyed your son."[52]

The meaning of these words soon became clear to Volumnia and the other women. As they returned to Rome, Coriolanus ordered the Volscian soldiers to retreat. When the Volscian leaders learned of this order, they demanded to know what was happening and he told them he would no longer help them destroy his beloved homeland. Without that help, the Volscians' campaign fell apart and they no longer posed a threat to Rome. But in retaliation for his change of heart, they executed Coriolanus.

In later times, the Romans remembered his myth with great affection as an example of the importance of loyalty to

one's country. It was generally acknowledged that the story had two heroes. One was Coriolanus, for saving Rome in the nick of time. The other was his mother Volumnia, for inspiring him to do his duty, even if it meant he would lose his life. Such was the innate strength of Roman patriotism, and such was the power of Rome's heroic myths, which taught new generations the value of love of country.

A small band of Roman women led by Coriolanus's mother beg Coriolanus to save Rome from the Volscians.

Women as Brave as Men?

Volumnia was not the only female hero, or heroine, in Roman mythology. Another from the gallant tales of the early days of the Republic was a young woman named Cloelia, whose brave deed took place during the same incident in which bold Horatius successfully defended the bridge. After he kept the Etruscans at bay and prevented them from entering Rome, their king, Lars Porsenna, tried to save face by striking a hard bargain with Roman leaders. Earlier, during his advance on Rome, he had succeeded in capturing the Janiculum Hill,

which in those days lay outside the city limits. Porsenna demanded that the Romans give him several hostages in exchange for his withdrawing his forces from the Janiculum and returning to Etruria.

After giving the offer some serious thought, the Roman leaders decided, reluctantly, to agree to Porsenna's terms. They sent a group of hostages to him, and among their number were Cloelia and several other women. Perhaps Porsenna and his officers thought that only Rome's men possessed the kind of rash courage that Horatius had displayed in his stand at the bridge. If so, they were sorely mistaken. No sooner had Cloelia been herded, along with her fellow hostages, into a tent in the Etruscan camp, than she contrived an escape plan. "The Etruscan lines were not far from the Tiber," Livy later wrote. "One day with a number of other girls who had consented to follow her," Cloelia "eluded the guards, swam across the river under a hail of missiles, and brought her company safe to Rome."[53]

Porsenna was at first quite naturally furious that these women had engineered an escape right under the noses of his soldiers. He demanded that the Romans return Cloelia at once or else he would consider the deal he had made with them to be null and void. To honor the agreement, the Romans did order the young woman to give herself up to Porsenna. But by the time she walked back into the Etruscan camp, he had had a change of heart. Having given the matter some thought, he had been struck by the fact that Roman women were no less brave than Roman men. Impressed with Cloelia's courage, he "praised her publicly," Livy said, and allowed her to take more of the hostages back to Rome. "Friendly relations were thus restored,"[54] and not long afterward Porsenna gathered his soldiers and departed from Roman territory.

Keepers of the Sacred Fire

For her courage, the Romans later honored Cloelia by erecting a statue of her, sitting on horseback, in a prominent spot in the city. This was a tribute paid to very few women in Roman history, since Rome was, after all, a patriarchal, or male-dominated, society. That did not mean that no women held important positions in that society, however. Several mythical women, including Volumnia and Cloelia, had demonstrated daring, heroism, and patriotism. They had also become models of old-fashioned Roman values associated with virtuous women, including chastity, or sexual purity.

Indeed, Roman society honored those legendary women, along with real women like them, by appointing a group of women to high religious office. They were known as the Vestal Virgins because they were priestesses in the main temple of Vesta (the Greek Hestia), goddess of the hearth. (Every Roman house, whether poor or rich, had a hearth used for cooking and warmth, so the hearth became the chief symbol of the Roman home.) The Vestals' primary duty was to maintain and

Buried Alive

If found guilty of having sexual relations, a Vestal Virgin was led through the city streets to an area called the *campus sceleratus*, or "evil field." There, soldiers placed her in an underground chamber with enough food and water to last a few days. The entrance was then permanently sealed, as was her fate.

safeguard the hearth of the Roman state, with its sacred fire, located inside the temple. They also took care of some sacred objects and prepared a special salt cake employed in various public religious festivals.

Initially, when the office of the Vestals was created (most likely during the early years of the Monarchy), there were two women who served together at any given time. Over time their number increased to four and finally to six. The young women were selected by the *pontifex maximus,* the chief priest of Rome's state religion, from a list of girls from patrician families. Generally they ranged in age from six to ten. Their term of service in the temple was thirty years, although some ended up serving for life.

While in service to the goddess and Roman society, the Vestals dwelled in a state-sponsored house known as the Hall of Vesta, situated near the center of the city. Their dresses

The primary duty of the Vestal Virgins was to maintain and safeguard the hearth of the Roman state and to keep the sacred fire burning.

A Job to Be Taken Seriously

The Vestal Virgins were expected to take their jobs seriously, as the story of one of their number, Postumia, shows. In 420 B.C., according to the oral traditions that Livy and other later Roman writers used, she was accused of sexual impropriety. It turned out that the charge was baseless. It had been partly based on Postumia's habit of dressing in fancy clothes and frequently making jokes to lighten her conversations with others. After examining her carefully, the authorities judged her innocent. At the same time, they cautioned her to be more careful in the future. She should dress more conservatively, they said, and refrain from being too jovial, for the office of the Vestals was a dignified one and was therefore not to be taken lightly.

A relief depicts five Vestal Virgins. Their duties were taken so seriously that those who broke their sacred vows were punished by being buried alive.

were of plain white linen to symbolize their purity. This reflected the fact that they were expected to maintain their virginity during their entire thirty years of service. If a Vestal was suspected of breaking this rule and found guilty, the penalty was extremely harsh—being buried alive. In addition, her lover, if caught, was beaten to death.

Vesta's sacred fire and the priestesses who maintained it were seen as essential to the Roman state. As the late noted scholar R.M. Ogilvie put it, "The cult of Vesta was symbolic of the eternal power of Rome. Her treasures were jealously guarded [and] the storehouse [in the temple] was kept shut [during most] of the year, and only the Vestals and the *pontifex maximus* were allowed to enter it."[55]

Part of the respect these women commanded and the influence they wielded derived from the great age of their

institution. The Vestals first appeared during the same period from which most of Rome's heroic myths emerged. So like the power of myths in Roman society, that of the Vestals rested partly on pervasive popular reverence for things ancient, mysterious, and associated with how things came to be. Indeed, Gardner remarks, the Romans were fascinated with "beginnings—the beginning of rituals, of place-names, of institutions, of cities, of the whole Roman people and its history."[56] The idea of having heroic or morally superior forebears—be they stalwart solders like Horatius, caring mothers like Volumnia, or chaste priestesses like the Vestals—kept Rome's heroic myths alive and popular among its people for centuries.

Cultural Survival of Roman Myths

The stories of Rome's mythical heroes remained popular during the late Republican centuries and on through the years of the Roman Empire. It was during this period that the first substantial literary accounts of the myths appeared. Even after the western Empire disintegrated in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., these tales survived. Over time they were absorbed into the collective folklore, literature, paintings, sculptures, and music of the medieval and early modern European nations and peoples that arose atop the ruins of the vanished Roman civilization. These societies, in turn, passed the myths along to the modern world. As a result, the characters, including human heroes and gods, and events of the Roman myths still live on in various plays, musical works, paintings, films, and other art forms.

Four Ancient Myth-Tellers

The formal literary presentation of Rome's heroic myths began during the last two centuries of the Republic. Fabius Pictor, who flourished around 200 B.C., or possibly somewhat earlier, was the first known Roman writer to attempt to compile a comprehensive history of Rome. He wrote it in Greek, in part because writing in Latin was not yet fashionable. He also based

PVB. OVIDII
NASONIS SVLMONENSIS
POETÆ OPERVM
TOMVS TERTIVS:
IN QVO
Metamorphoseωs Lib. XV.
Cum Commentariis RAPHAELIS REGII, &
Annotationibus Jacobi Micylli:
ET
Carmen in Ibin.
Cum Commentariis DOMITII ZAROTTI &
IACOBI MICYLLI.
QVIBVS ACCESSERVNT OBSERVATIONES
HERCVLIS CIOFANI & GREG. BERSMANNI
Notæ perpetuæ,
Cum INDICE copiosissimo.

FRANCOFVRTI,
Typis Wechelianis apud Claudium
Marnium & heredes Ioannis Aubrij.
M. DCI.
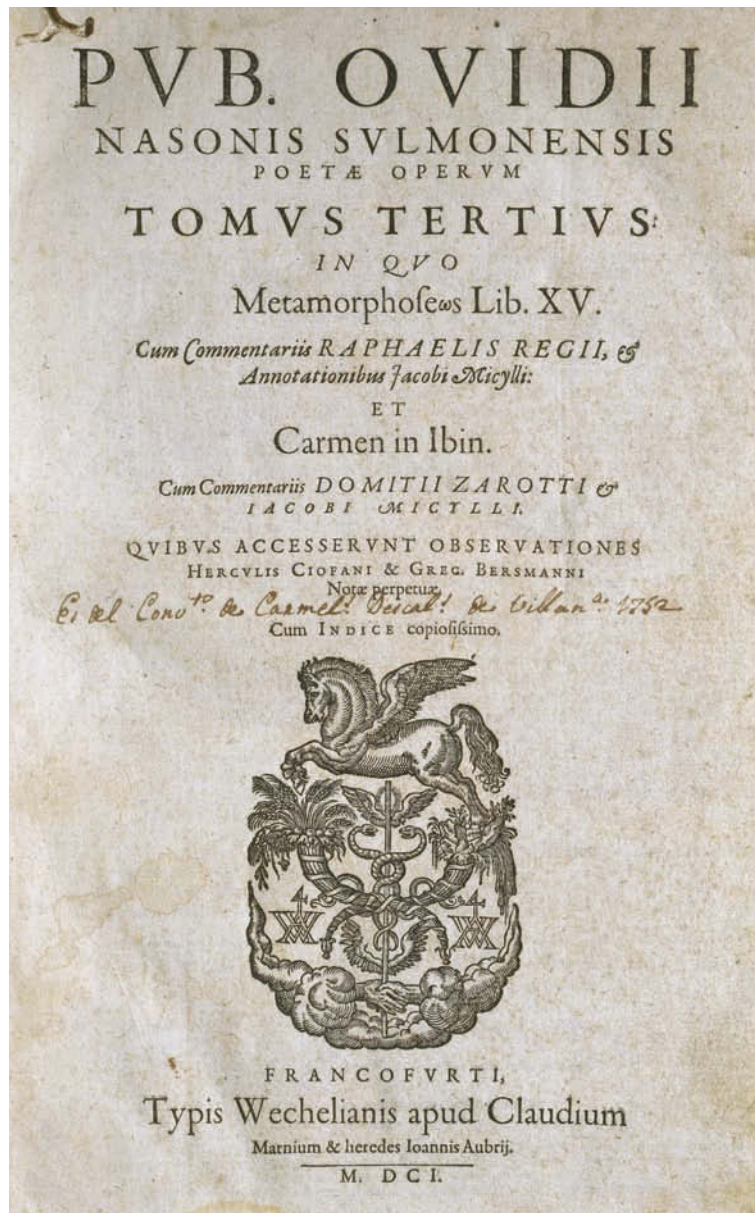
it to some extent on a now lost history of Rome by a Greek named Diocles of Peparethus. Fabius's account began with Aeneas's arrival in Italy, showing that the myth of Aeneas was already well known in his time. Still, Fabius did not treat the story as fictional. Like most later Roman writers, he accepted various elements of folklore as real events.

Fabius also told the story of Romulus, the supposed founder of Rome. His version of the infants Romulus and Remus set adrift on the Tiber, excerpted here, depicted them floating in a tub. (Fabius's actual text is lost. But it was partly reconstructed by the noted early-modern German historian Theodor Mommsen, based on some ancient texts that described it.)

> Knocking against a stone, the tub capsized, and the screaming infants were upset into the river mud. They were heard by a she-wolf who had just [given birth] and had her udders full of milk. She came and gave her teats to the boys, to nurse them, and as they were drinking she licked them clean with her tongue. Above them flew a woodpecker, which guarded the children, and also carried food to them. The father was providing for his sons: for the wolf and the woodpecker are animals [sacred] to father Mars.[57]

In writing his massive history of Rome in the late first century B.C., Livy used Fabius's work as one of his principal sources. So it is likely that Livy's version of Aeneas, Romulus, and other mythical characters was similar to Fabius's. The same can be said for Plutarch, who flourished in the first century of the Empire. Plutarch's biographies of Romulus, King Numa Pompilius, and Coriolanus also borrowed material from Fabius's work, although both Plutarch and Livy used many other sources as well.

Throughout the rest of antiquity, Plutarch and Livy remained among the four leading ancient tellers of Roman myths. (They remain so today.) The third was Virgil, especially in his masterly *Aeneid.* That telling of Aeneas's tale became the classic version, translated numerous times into many languages in medieval and modern times.

Meanwhile, the fourth great ancient myth-teller was the popular Roman poet Ovid. A younger contemporary of Livy, he collected most of the best-known

Ovid Exiled

Ovid's poetry was widely popular among Roman readers, partly because of his writing skills and also because he frequently described love affairs and sex. Eventually, however, he somehow displeased the emperor, Augustus, who banished him to a town on the shores of the distant Black Sea.

Greco-Roman myths in his *Metamorphoses.* Ovid wrote for a mainly Roman audience, so in his versions of the Greek tales the gods bear their Roman names. A large-scale upsurge of interest in Ovid's book occurred in Europe from the 1000s to 1200s as a number of priests and other Christian writers used the characters and plots Ovid described to teach their congregations moral lessons. This approach reached its peak in the 1300s with the appearance of the *Ovide Moralisé,* a French version of the *Metamorphoses* that equated or compared various mythical characters with personages in the Bible.

Roman Myths in Later Literature

Many early modern readers and writers were as enamored of the Roman myths as their late medieval counterparts had been. Noteworthy among the writers were several French poets, playwrights, and novelists, including the great Pierre Corneille (1606–1684). Like his younger and equally talented colleague, Jean Racine, he loved the old tales from classical mythology. The difference was that Racine's plays dealt mainly with Greek myths, whereas Corneille tackled Roman as well as Greek stories. In his *Horace* (1640), which drew heavily on Livy's account, Corneille portrayed the mythical war between the Romans and Albans in which the Roman trio fought the Alban trio.

Another Frenchman whose works competed with those of Corneille and Racine was Paul Scarron (1610–1660). Scarron's 1653 poem *Virgile Travesti,* or "Virgil in Disguise," is, as the title suggests, a comic takeoff on the great Roman poet Virgil and his epic *Aeneid.* Scarron created humor in the piece partly by the use of vulgar language and also through anachronisms (things portrayed in the wrong time period), including having Virgil quote Corneille. It was said that when Racine first read the *Virgile Travesti* he laughed so hard he almost fell off his chair.

England also witnessed the production of a large amount of literature employing mythological references in the early modern period. No writer utilized myths as often and as skillfully as English playwright William Shakespeare (1564–1616). Indeed, entire volumes have been written

French playwright Pierre Corneille, pictured, brought Roman and Greek myths to life for seventeenth-century French audiences. His play Horace *describes the war between the Romans and the Albans.*

about his thousands of allusions to characters and situations from Greek and Roman myths. He drew most of these references from the works of Virgil, Ovid, Livy, Plutarch, and, sometimes, late medieval works that had retold classical myths.

For example, both Livy and Plutarch had recounted the story of Coriolanus's defection to the Volscians and his mother's successful mission to change his mind and heart. Shakespeare decided to write an entire play about Coriolanus and based it primarily on Plutarch's version of the tale. It is not hard to understand why a master of tragedy like

Shakespeare's Debt to Plutarch

William Shakespeare's views of ancient Rome and its myths about Coriolanus and other legendary characters were strongly influenced by Plutarch's writings. Sometime in the 1590s, Shakespeare got hold of a copy of Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (which North renamed *Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*), originally published in 1579. The playwright's works *Coriolanus, Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* were all based to some degree on North's version of Plutarch's biographies. If one looks closely at North's translation, it is clear that the translator was not as adept as Shakespeare was in organization, character description, and other literary skills. Indeed, Shakespeare was gifted at taking source material of average quality and turning it into high-quality drama.

Shakepeare's play Coriolanus *is performed in today's London. The bard based his play in part on Plutarch's earlier work.*

Shakespeare would be drawn to this myth. As Shakespearean scholar Beryl Rowland points out, the story was

perfectly adapted to the traditional conception of tragedy as being the fall of a great man. The classical [character] flaw which [causes that fall] is hubris [pride], and it is Coriolanus's haughty and imperi-

ous [overbearing] temperament which Plutarch also stresses at the beginning of his account. . . . Shakespeare shows what can happen to a man [emotionally] unsuited to cope with the issues [of Roman society in his time].[58]

Thus, Shakespeare recognized that Coriolanus's transformation from an arrogant snob into a caring patriot was guaranteed to move theater audiences. The fact that the urgings of his stalwart Roman mother bring about this change heightens the drama even more. Audiences typically delight in the scene where he thanks Volumnia and the other women for helping him to recognize his duty. In Shakespeare's words, "O mother, mother! What have you done? Behold, the heavens do open, the gods look down, and this unnatural scene they laugh at. . . . You have won a happy victory [for] Rome. . . . Ladies, you deserve to have a temple built [to honor] you. All the swords in Italy . . . could not have made this peace."[59]

Artists' Depictions of the Myths

Rome's heroic myths also became rich fodder for artists, including painters, sculptors, and musical composers. During the Roman Empire, Greek and Roman artists reproduced scenes from those tales in paintings done on vases, bowls, and especially walls. When modern excavators unearthed the ruins of the Roman city of Pompeii, which had been buried in the A.D. 79 eruption of the volcano Mount Vesuvius, they found numerous murals with mythological themes. Among the best preserved is one showing a doctor tending to Aeneas's wounds while the hero's son, Ascanius, looks on.

Centuries later, in modern times, painters were no less fascinated by the classical myths. A painting on an Italian dish marked 1544 depicts Volumnia lecturing her son Coriolanus. Almost exactly a century later, Italian painter

Hersilia's Bravery

Jacques-Louis David's painting, the *Intervention of the Sabine Women,* shows Romulus's new wife, the Sabine maiden Hersilia, in the foreground, with her arms outstretched, in effect forcing the Roman and Sabine soldiers apart. Other women behind her are in the act of doing the same.

Giovanni Francesco Barbieri portrayed the same subject in his *Volumnia Before Coriolanus.*

The myths of Romulus and Remus were also popular among painters. In his 1616 work *Romulus and Remus,* the great Belgian artist Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) shows the shepherd (or farmer) Faustulus coming upon the infant twins being fed by the she-wolf. The mythical nurturing wolf also appears prominently in *Romulus and Remus and Their Nursemaid,* by Swiss painter Jacques-Laurent Agasse (1767–1849).

Few great painters were as captivated by Roman mythology as France's Jacques-Louis David (pronounced da-VEED, 1748–1825). One of his most beautiful and famous works is *The Oath of the Horatii,* painted in 1784. It shows the three Roman brothers swearing to fight to the death for their

The excavations at Pompeii revealed many wall paintings with mythological themes. This fresco depicts Aeneas having his wounds bound by a doctor as his son, Ascanius, looks on.

Sculptures Based on Roman Myths

A number of European sculptors, especially in the Renaissance, turned out statues and other artworks based on characters and incidents from Roman mythology. In the early 1400s, for instance, Italian sculptor Jacopo della Quercia produced an exquisite life-size statue of the mythical Rhea Silvia holding her young sons, Romulus and Remus. Later, in the 1700s, French sculptor Augustin Cayot created a statue of Queen Dido, who fell in love with Aeneas. That 1711 work, showing the queen holding a sword to her chest, is presently in Paris's Louvre Museum. Perhaps the most famous sculpture based on Roman mythology is Gianlorenzo Bernini's large-than-life-sized work showing Aeneas bearing his father Anchises on his shoulder as they flee the burning Troy. The 1619 statue is now displayed in the Galleria Borghese in Rome.

Gianlorenzo Bernini's sculpture Flight from Troy *depicts Aeneas carrying his father Anchises during their flight from the burning city of Troy.*

country, while their father, holding their swords, and their weeping mother and sisters look on. Among the other myth-based works of David are *The Lictors Bring Brutus the Bodies of His Sons* (1789), *Homer Reciting His Verses to the Greeks* (1794), and *The Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799).

The Heroes in Music and Film

The musical arts have been particularly enriched by the characters, plots, and themes of Roman mythology. English composer Henry Purcell's 1689 opera *Dido and Aeneas* was one of the earliest modern musical versions of a Roman myth. The lyrics to Dido's last aria (song), just prior to her suicide, are especially expressive: "When I am laid in earth, may my wrongs create no trouble in your breast. Remember me, but ah! forget my fate."[60]

In 1858 French composer Hector Berlioz (BAIR-lee-ohz, 1803–1869) finished perhaps the largest musical piece ever based on the Roman myths. Titled *Les Troyens,* or "The Trojans," it is a huge operatic version of books 2 and 4 of Virgil's *Aeneid.* Originally it was a single work that took close to five hours to perform. Today it is sometimes presented as two separate operas—*The Fall of Troy* and *The Trojans at Carthage*—performed on successive nights. In the first, the Trojans celebrate what they think is the end of the war; they drag the wooden horse into their city; the Greeks hiding inside the horse climb out and sack Troy; and Aeneas makes his escape. In the second opera, Aeneas arrives at Carthage and meets Dido; she falls in love with him; he eventually decides he must move on; and she commits suicide.

A made-for-TV movie of a stage performance of *Les Troyens* was released in 1984 and a similar filmed performance of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* appeared in 1995. To date, however, the only attempt to make a straight dramatic film of Aeneas's story was the 1962 movie *The Last Glory of Troy.* A low-budget, badly dubbed Italian project, it throws out most of the mythical elements contained in Virgil's epic. Although it does show Aeneas and his followers escaping the burning Troy, most of the movie consists of a made-up, tedious plot about a tyrannical king trying to thwart the hero, woodenly played by the then famous bodybuilder Steve Reeves.

Reeves also starred in a higher-budget Italian film made in 1961 about the myths of Romulus and Remus. Titled *Duel of the Titans,* it depicts the she-wolf nurturing the twins and several other episodes mentioned in the ancient sources.

Berlioz's Worries About *The Trojans*

Almost from the beginning, composer Hector Berlioz's enormous project based on sections of Virgil's Aeneid *was plagued with problems. Most of these were due to the work's great length, complexity, and the huge number of musicians and singers needed to perform it. Few musical backers and conductors had the vision or courage to give the work its due, and Berlioz also worried that no singer would be able to do justice to the role of Dido. The composer's mounting frustration is evident in this 1858 entry he made in his personal journal (later published in his memoirs):*

I have just completed the poem and the music of *Les Troyens*, an opera in five acts. What is going to happen to this vast work? The subject seems to me elevated, magnificent, and deeply moving. . . . [I fear that] I will not be able to find an intelligent and dedicated woman capable of interpreting the main role. It requires beauty, a great voice, genuine dramatic talent, a complete musician, with a soul and heart of fire. Still less would I be able to draw on all the many resources which have to be entirely at my disposal, without interference or objections from anybody. My blood boils at the mere thought of having to endure for the performance and staging of such a work all the idiotic obstacles I have had to put up with and which day in [and] day out I see thrust in the way of other composers who write for our great opera house. The clash between my own will and that of malevolent fools would be extremely dangerous now. I feel quite capable of doing anything to them and might kill these people like dogs.

Hector Berlioz. *Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*. Translated by Michel Austin. Excerpted on The Hector Berlioz Website. www.hberlioz.com/Scores/trojans.htm.

Composer Hector Berlioz's epic opera The Trojans *is performed in France in 2006. French mezzo-soprano Sylvie Brunet, right, performs as Dido, queen of Carthage.*

Noted University of Arizona scholar Jon Solomon, an expert on films about the ancient world, writes,

> *Duel of the Titans* [is] a fairly faithful borrowing from Plutarch's *Life of Romulus* and Livy's *History of Rome.* . . . The look of the film is enhanced by expansive crane shots of the beautiful wooded [hills] not far from where the events of the ancient stories were supposed to have taken place in 753 B.C. [and] the costumes are fittingly simple and ragged for the relatively small crowds of villagers [portrayed as the] ancestors of mighty Rome. This primitive atmosphere elevates the film above most other sword-and-sandal movies of its day.[61]

The ancient Romans could not have conceived of seeing the stories of their myths portrayed by actors caught on film and projected onto giant screens. They had to make do with oral histories, a few written accounts and paintings, and

Bodybuilders Steve Reeves, foreground, and Gordon Scott played Romulus and Remus in the 1961 film Duel of the Titans, *which was adapted from accounts of the myth by the ancient historians Livy and Plutarch.*

above all their imaginations. Similarly, people today cannot predict with surety the kinds of artistic and mechanical mediums that will be used to depict literary characters and themes centuries from now. More certain is that long after everyone alive today is gone, the Roman myths, along with the Greek ones, will still be revisited and reinterpreted as people imagine them in a wide variety of old and new forms. These tales from Western civilization's formative centuries have survived for close to three millennia and have become part of the fabric of modern society. There is little doubt that they will continue to fascinate, inspire, and entertain for generations to come.

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GLOSSARY

ab urbe condita: "From the founding of the city," or more commonly, "from Rome's founding," commonly abbreviated AUC when used with dates.

anthropomorphism: Assigning human attributes to nonhuman objects.

antiquity: Ancient times.

Apennine culture: The name given by archaeologists to the inhabitants of central Italy during the Bronze and Iron Ages; one theory suggests that the Romans evolved out of that culture.

city-state: A small nation built around a single city; a political entity quite common in the ancient world.

consuls: In the Roman Republic, administrator-generals who were elected annually and served jointly.

epic poem: A long literary work, in verse, with larger-than-life characters and serious themes such as war, heroism, or human destiny.

exposure: The practice of leaving an unwanted infant outside to die.

magistrates: Public officials.

oracle: A message thought to come from the gods; or the sacred site where such a message was given; or the priestess who delivered the message.

pantheon: The collection of gods worshipped by a people or nation.

patricians: A high-placed Roman social class made up of noble families, many with roots going back to the early Republic or earlier.

pontifex maximus: In ancient Rome, the chief priest of the state religion.

Roman Empire: The Roman government ruled by emperors between 30 B.C. and A.D. 476; also, the time period in question.

Roman Monarchy: The Roman government supposedly ruled by kings from 753 to 509 B.C.; also, the time period in question.

Roman Republic: The Roman government run by representatives of the people between 509 and 30 B.C.; also, the time period in question.

sacrifice: An offering made to satisfy a god or gods.

shade: The spirit of a dead person.

Vestal Virgins: Priestesses of the Temple of Vesta in Rome.

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Historian Don Nardo has written numerous acclaimed volumes about ancient civilizations and peoples. Among these are studies of the religious beliefs and myths of those peoples, including the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Sumerians, and others. Nardo also composes and arranges orchestral music. He resides with his wife, Christine, in Massachusetts.

Myths are stories of gods, heroes, and monsters that include tales about the creation and destruction of worlds, epic battles, and heroic adventures. But myths are not random imaginings; they reflect the cultures that created them. The Mythology and Culture Worldwide series from Lucent Books is designed to help young readers understand the origins, cultural importance and impact of world mythologies. Each volume focuses on one cultural or national mythology. Major myths, characters, gods and goddesses, and themes of the mythology are presented with a particular emphasis on tying these stories back to the geography, history, natural resources, technological state, social organization, religious beliefs, and values of the culture that created the mythology.

Full color photographs and illustrations include a map of the geographic area specific to the volume's mythology, a family tree or other visual organizer of major entities covered in the volume, and an alphabetically-arranged table listing the major entities with pronunciations and brief descriptors. A glossary, a bibliography and a subject index provide useful tools for further research and discussion. Mythology and Culture Worldwide is a valuable resource to help readers visualize as an integrated whole a culture's mythology, its origins, and its impact.